

# Sanmugathasan, the Unrepentant Left and the Ethnic Crisis in Sri Lanka

RAVI VAITHEESPARA

It is a daunting task to understand contemporary Sri Lankan society with all its contradictions. While there has been much theoretically sophisticated and often obtuse scholarship on the ethnic crisis, this paper presents a relatively simple and straightforward analysis of the conflict as provided in the 1970s and 1980s by a major trade union and communist party leader, N Sanmugathasan, which has turned out to be both prescient and insightful.

The ethnic conflict, far from diminishing, has over the years become normalised and integral to the political-military and even socio-economic balance and dynamic of Sri Lanka. This steady “normalisation” of the war has been facilitated by the fact that the main theatre of carnage has been confined largely to the relatively restricted, predominantly Tamil and Muslim strongholds of the north and east of the island. Boasting a steady economic growth rate amidst and despite an ongoing civil war,<sup>1</sup> Sri Lanka continues to attract an extraordinary amount of foreign aid and capital for a host of reasons including its strategic location both geographically, commercially and culturally as well as an attractive, west-friendly, tourist and commercial hub in the Indian Ocean. The apparent contradiction between what appears to be a modern, pro-western, rapidly globalising Sri Lankan society, which for all its modernity and easy westernisation is also at the same time prone to bouts of mass insurrections and pogromist violence makes understanding contemporary Sri Lanka or the ongoing ethnic conflict all the more daunting.

Scholarship on the crisis has developed and transformed over the years reflecting in the process, aside from other factors, the changing dynamics of the conflict itself. If the dominant scholarly trend in the early years reflected a left/liberal bias that sought to locate the conflict within the wider national and international context of postcolonial Sri Lankan history and the rise and collusion of a virulent form of Sinhala/Buddhist majoritarian nationalism with state power, more recent scholarship seems to have come full circle<sup>2</sup> with its focus on the local and the “fragment” and has been more ethnographic in orientation.<sup>3</sup> The shift towards the normalisation of the war has also helped shift the focus to Tamil violence and “terrorism” which has come to be seen as the major irritant and impediment to an otherwise stable and prospering neo-liberal democracy in south Asia. Accompanying and paralleling this shift towards ethnography has been a trend towards an increasing, theoretically sophisticated, scholarship that no longer attributes the causes of the conflict to basic material and ideological struggles over access to jobs, resources and land but towards a more rarefied and fundamental failure of the imagination – albeit of Sri Lanka’s ruling classes and policymakers.<sup>4</sup>

It is against the background of these theoretically sophisticated and often obtuse scholarly developments that it would be instructive to invoke and consider a relatively more simple and straightforward analysis of the conflict – an analysis presented by a major trade union and communist party leader, N Sanmugathasan, whose perspective on the crisis though quite

simple and straightforward, and inflected by the language of Marxist orthodoxy, is still refreshingly prescient and insightful. It is also important to note here that given the significant role Sanmugathasan played in the left and trade union movement in Sri Lanka, both as a leader and an outspoken ideologue and critic – influencing in the process successive generations of left and trade union activists in Sri Lanka – it is surprising that Sanmugathasan has so far received little scholarly attention.<sup>5</sup> Sanmugathasan's writings certainly deserve attention as his writings and vision were – unlike many writers on the conflict – above all, informed and grounded in his long and active political experience as a major trade union and communist party leader that spanned almost the entire period of postcolonial Sri Lankan history when much of these tragic developments took place. What also makes his perspective particularly valuable is his understanding of the conflict as part and parcel of a broader unity of developments in Sri Lanka, developments that had led Sri Lanka from its earlier standing as one of Britain's "model colonies" into political authoritarianism, militarism, ultra-nationalism and militant separatism. Recalling and perhaps affirming at least the aspect of political economy in K M Panikkar's rather disparaging depiction of Sri Lanka as an island and a people thoroughly permeated by colonialism and colonial culture,<sup>6</sup> for Sanmugathasan, the key to understanding much of the unfortunate trajectory of modern Sri Lankan history lay in the distinctly pro-imperialist, and comprador character of Sri Lanka's ruling elite and political culture from the time well before formal independence to the present day.

### A Remarkable and Controversial Figure

Sanmugathasan, known as Shan by his associates and friends, was certainly a remarkable and controversial figure in the history of the left movement in Sri Lanka. He had risen to prominence as an articulate champion and leader of the faction that broke from the parent Ceylon Communist Party (CCP) over its "revisionism" and its advocacy of the parliamentary path to socialism in the early 1960s. The splinter led by Shan rejected this "parliamentary road" and was of course, much more radical and militant. It was under Shan's watch that the leader of the militant Jantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Rohana Wijeyeweera, joined the party and became the leader of the youth wing before breaking off to form the JVP, and eventually, launched what came to be the bloodiest campaigns to seize state power in modern Sri Lankan history. Despite the fallout from being implicated in this "misadventure", it is evident that Shan's role in the trade union movement and the CCP was informed and radicalised by the broader role he played as a brilliant theoretician, doctrinaire ideologue and defender of revolutionary Marxist/Leninism among Marxist theoreticians and strategists in Sri Lanka and beyond. Shan's powerful critique and rejection of the "revisionist" path – has special relevance to the present discussion since it was this move by Sri Lanka's mainstream left parties that is blamed not only for the betrayal of the working class and the fragmentation and demise of the left as a potent force in Sri Lanka, but also for the parliamentary left's embrace of communalism – which was seen as the final straw in Sri Lanka's dangerous descent into extremist nationalism and full-scale ethnic conflagration.<sup>7</sup>

Hailing from relatively humble beginnings that marked him from many of his left contemporaries,<sup>8</sup> Shan, after graduating from the University of Ceylon in 1943, formally joined the CCP a year after it split from its parent Trotskyite, Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP).<sup>9</sup> Right from the beginning, Shan was engaged with trade union work and in his life-long role as a leader of some of the most powerful trade union organisations in Sri Lanka, he gained a reputation as a militant trade unionist. His engagement with trade union work does not appear to have hindered his frequent international travels and familiarity with many of the leading international left figures and trade union leaders of his time.<sup>10</sup>

### Opposition to Revisionism

As a result of what was considered Khrushchev's "revisionism" that included the advocacy of a parliamentary path to socialism, a second major split occurred in the left movement in Sri Lanka and a significant segment of the party under Shan's leadership broke away to found CCP (Maoist). Shan had been the most articulate leader of the opposition to this "revisionism" within the party and the breakaway party prided itself as the local representative of the "correct" principles of revolutionary Marxist Leninism best represented at that time by Maoism, and hence, the party came to be identified as the CCP (Maoist).<sup>11</sup> It was this split and the resulting leadership position that gave Shan greater prominence and brought him into the national political limelight [Vehujan and Imayavaramban 1994].

Given these developments, it is hardly surprising that under Shan's leadership, the CCP (Maoist) doggedly rejected the coalition and alliance politics with bourgeois nationalist parties that both the mainstream left parties, the LSSP and the CCP (Moscow) had embraced since the late 1950s. Though this strategy of the CCP (Maoists) may have closed the doors to avenues of state power, it also enabled them to be free from the constraints such political power imposed. It thus opened the doors to working with groups and issues that were not so practical or feasible for the parliamentary left. For example, it opened up the possibility for Shan to organise the plantation workers of Indian Tamil origin on the tea estates into the militant "Red Flag Union". Many of the members of this union had been disenfranchised by the policies introduced by the first government in power. The parliamentary left was increasingly indisposed to organise these predominantly "Tamil" workers who constituted Sri Lanka's largest proletariat population at the time for fear of losing favour among the majority Sinhala community.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the CCP (Maoist) under Shan's leadership boldly took up the struggle of the "untouchable" panchamar castes among the Tamils in the Jaffna region.<sup>13</sup> Since the untouchable castes in Jaffna were a minority with respect to the higher castes in all the electoral districts in the north, this meant that any political force dependent on its electoral strength could not afford to alienate the majority community. It is through his work with the Red Flag Union and in leading the anti-caste struggle that Shan gained a reputation for his radicalism and militancy.

Although Shan had been a regular writer and contributor to various party journals and newspapers,<sup>14</sup> it was during his

detention that he wrote his first major monograph, *A Marxist Looks at the History of Ceylon* [Sanmugathan 1972]. In this and the final monograph which he wrote towards the end of his life, *The Memoirs of an Unrepentant Communist* [Sanmugathan 1989], as well as the numerous essays<sup>15</sup> he wrote during his final days, Shan provides a unique perspective on the trajectory of modern Sri Lankan history and politics. Hailing not just from the left but from a dissident left perspective that was critical of the politics of the parliamentary left in Sri Lanka, Shan's writings touches on a variety of subjects ranging from Sri Lanka's transition from colonialism to independence, the origins and trajectory of the left movement in Sri Lanka, on the leaders and politics of the two dominant political parties in Sri Lanka; on the insurrection and politics of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) (People's Liberation Front); and finally on the ethnic conflict and Tamil youth militancy and separatism. Given Shan's unusual and unique political location and experience, the perspectives he offers on these important subjects certainly deserve careful attention.

### Independence or Neo-colonialism

One of the most striking and persistent themes in Shan's writings on modern Sri Lankan history is his overarching emphasis on the distinctly pro-imperialist and comprador character and orientation of its ruling classes and political culture. Contrasting this sharply with India, Shan drives home the point that the Ceylonese elite were decidedly much more pro-imperialist than was the case in India and that there was very little of the kind of popular anti-colonial nationalism that was animating India at the time. As he explains with characteristic bluntness: "Ceylon had no national bourgeoisie and no revolutionary movement as in India" [Sanmugathan 1989: 31]. Unlike the case in most colonies, where one could expect both a comprador, pro-imperialist bourgeoisie to exist alongside a nationally-oriented bourgeoisie, Shan asserts that there was only one kind and that it was distinctly pro-imperialist in character and orientation [Sanmugathan ibid: 58]. For Shan, it was only well after formal independence that a nationally oriented bourgeoisie emerged in Sri Lanka (in 1951) and that too from the very same elite, feudal class background that had spawned the comprador bourgeoisie.

Thus for Shan, the nationalist movement in Sri Lanka was not only rather weak from the start, but even the little that existed was largely inspired by the neighbouring popular Indian nationalist movement. This rather weak, largely imitative nationalism in Sri Lanka was primarily spearheaded by the anti-imperialist sentiments of the early left leaders in Sri Lanka who also happened to be its most ardent supporters. For instance, in his memoirs Shan recalls witnessing the future prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, address a mass public rally at Colombo's main Galle Face Green, flanked by some of Sri Lanka's early left leaders in the early 1940s [Sanmugathan ibid: 31].

It is in the same vein that Shan offers an analysis of the momentous events of Ceylon's formal independence from Britain in 1948. Preferring to see this not so much as a moment of rupture but as a period of transition from colonialism to neo-colonialism, Shan depicts the new political configuration engendered by this

event as an uneasy compromise between the imperialists and the native bourgeoisie. As he explains:

British imperialism which had been badly weakened [by the war]... could no longer continue to rule its colonies in the old way by direct force. It decided to arrive at a compromise with the native bourgeoisie...who had also begun to be alarmed that if the national liberation movements were to be allowed to develop in too revolutionary a way, it too would be swept away along with imperialism...This is the sham commodity that was passed off as independence in 1948 to countries like India, Burma and Ceylon. In 1948 Ceylon passed from colonial to neo-colonial rule [ibid: 68-69].

In fact, Shan goes even further to suggest that under this neo-colonialism there is even greater exploitation:

The same old colonial exploitation, with slight modification continued. In some cases, it was even strengthened. It is a fact that today there is more foreign imperialist investment in Sri Lanka than during the colonial period [ibid: 68].

The feature of neo-colonialism was thus central to Shan's analysis of Sri Lanka's postcolonial history. It was plainly evident for him in the policies pursued by independent Ceylon's first political party in power, the United National Party (UNP) which, as he points out, managed to obtain even this semblance of independence only after signing a defence pact with England [ibid: 70].

This then is how Shan sets the stage for the emergence of a nationally-oriented bourgeoisie and a bourgeois nationalist party in Sri Lanka. Thus for Shan, UNP's pro-imperialist economic policies soon led to serious economic and political crises and set the stage for the emergence of a more nationally oriented bourgeois party in 1951 – the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by SWRD Bandaranayke (SWRD). However, for Shan, this was hardly a revolutionary event as it is often portrayed since its architect SWRD, hailed from the same class background as the ruling UNP leaders and was principally motivated by personal rivalry, political opportunism and populism [ibid: 71-72].

### The Bandaranayke Revolution

It is against this background that one needs to understand Shan's reading of one of the most crucial periods of modern Sri Lankan history that has been fixed in the majoritarian nationalist imagination as the "Bandaranayke revolution". This period is commonly portrayed with a great deal of ambivalence due to its paradoxical achievements, both as a movement towards decolonisation, nationalisation and the liberation of the ordinary Sinhala-speaking common man from the tyranny of the "Black-English man" and also as a movement heralding the rapid rise of anti-Tamil communalism which brought in its wake the dramatic institutionalisation of the "Sinhala only" policy and the first major anti-Tamil pogrom in 1958.

Though Shan concedes that SWRD's rise to power with a hodge-podge alliance of anti-UNP groups called the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) "represented a water-shed in the recent history of Sri Lanka" [ibid: 92], he is much less generous about its achievements and is highly critical of its impact. Shan attributes the victory not just to SWRD's highly successful and populist Sinhala only campaign and his appropriation of the radical slogans popularised by the left, but also more ominously to the

work of a key segment of the MEP alliance, the Eksath Bhikku Peramuna (EBP). The EBP consisted of a group of radical young Buddhist priests who went all out on behalf of the MEP in their election campaigns and effectively used the influence of the Buddhist Sangha to rally the people. Though hardly ever a sophisticated theorist of culture or nationalism, Shan clearly believed that the stirring up of Sinhala/Buddhist chauvinism had an enormous impact on the victory of the SWRD-led alliance which signalled a major turning point in the political history of Sri Lanka. Underlining this mechanism and method of the bourgeois nationalist takeover, he writes: "Never before or after in recent times had the Buddhist priesthood played such a role in Ceylon politics" [ibid: 92].

Thus for Shan, there was a great deal of populist chauvinism and opportunism in the SWRD-led victory despite the fact that once in power, SWRD did in fact introduce some moderate reforms. Shan points out, for example, that there was indeed a shift to the left in terms of international diplomacy and a move towards the camp and politics of the non-aligned movement that resulted in more friendly relations with communist states than was the case previously [ibid]. However, he was careful to add that there was:

Definitely a shift of power from the...English-speaking, pro-imperialist minded section of the bourgeoisie to the national and anti-imperialist sections. But there was no revolution in the sense that the class structure of society was not disturbed...nor did the...victory in any way affect the strangle hold of foreign imperialism on the economy [ibid: 93].

It was precisely because of such paradoxical outcomes that for Shan, the "Bandaranayke revolution" was in some sense far more dangerous since it along with the parliamentary left tried to run capitalism better than the openly pro-imperialist capitalist class. Thus, as far as Shan was concerned, people could be forgiven if they saw the UNP and the SLFP as essentially "A and B division of the same club" [ibid].

### 50 Years of Sri Lankan Left History

Shan's critique and perspective on the left movement in Sri Lanka is perhaps his most scathing and controversial contribution. The critique is quite simple and straightforward; so much so that it risks being overlooked. For Shan, one of the cardinal principles of revolutionary Marxist-Leninism is that the state is first and foremost the instrument of the ruling classes and that any move to topple this ruling class in order to bring about significant social change and revolution cannot proceed without a violent overthrow of this state machinery and its instruments of repression. As he explains:

The entire left movement accepts Marxism-Leninism as its ideology – at least in words. Now a cardinal theory of Marxism-Leninism is the Marxist theory of the state which teaches us that the state is the instrument of oppression of one class by another... Lenin has emphasised in his "State and Revolution" that without "smashing by force" this state machinery, it would be impossible for the working class to proceed to socialism; and also that the working class cannot take hold of the existing state machinery and use it for its purpose.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, Shan's powerful critique of the left movement in Sri Lanka hinges and rests on its failure to observe this fundamental

principle of Marxism – it was a failure which for Shan had serious repercussions and consequences for the entire history of the left movement in Sri Lanka. Taking a clearly Maoist line, Shan squarely blames this move on the impact of Khrushchev's ascendancy.

[It was Khrushchev who had with] a great ballyhoo...propagated the theories of peaceful coexistence with imperialism, peaceful competition with capitalism, and peaceful transition to socialism through parliament. Through his notorious visit to the us, he inaugurated the era of political collusion with US imperialism and the consequent betrayal of all national liberation movements [Sanmugathasan 1989: 135].

It was the left's capitulation to this "revisionism" that had spelled disaster to the entire left movement in Sri Lanka [ibid: 138]. It is through this powerful but logically simple explanation that Shan explains how the left, despite its promising beginnings in Sri Lanka, went on to make a series of disastrous blunders that have not only discredited the whole left movement, but ruined its chances of being a potent revolutionary force.

In his critique of the left, Shan took particular aim at the alliance of the parliamentary left parties with the Sinhala nationalist coalition led by the SLFP in a United Front (UF) in 1968. As he explains:

Marxism-Leninism teaches us that the working class must never accept the leadership of the bourgeoisie in any United Front...should always take care to safeguard its independence...The left in Sri Lanka did just the opposite. Its reformism and revisionism culminated in its total surrender to the SLFP...Once the left movement started slipping down the path of opportunism; there was no end to it [ibid: 6].

Citing a powerful example of this surrender – the deafening silence during the mass slaughter of thousands of mostly rural Sinhala youth during the JVP insurrection – a time when both the LSSP and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL) were represented in government, he wrote:

Let us agree that the JVP was misguided and misled. Does that justify the massive slaughter of thousands of youth that took place? Can all the waters of the Mahaweli wash away the silence of the left parties at that time? Do the Sinhalese chauvinists of today realise that many more Sinhalese youth were slaughtered in 1971 than by the so-called terrorists last year? [ibid: 7].

Thus the official left's primary concern with parliamentary power and the politics of majorities had as Shan explained, "led them to a situation where they have come to decide issues not on whether they are right or wrong but whether they meet the approval of the Sinhala masses" [ibid: 8]. This is also the way he read the left's increasing flirtation with the politics of communalism:

That is why, except for the attempt by the Marxist-Leninists to organise the Red Flag Union, in the 1960s, the other parties have neglected plantation labour. It is not an organisational defect. It is a matter of politics. It is for the same reason that the LSSP and the CPSL have refrained from making a bold and revolutionary call in the matter of the Tamil problem. It is not without significance that so far they have refused to call for the withdrawal of the army from the north and east [ibid: 8].

Shan essentially points to at least two major reasons for this failure and why the official left from a very early period "got dragged into the mire of parliamentary opportunism" [ibid: 2]. First of all, he explains, "it was pushed in this direction by the relatively easy-won victories to the state council at the general election of 1935 and the good showing at the first parliamentary

elections of 1947. But the worst influence came from the MEP victory in 1956. The left leadership got fooled into the belief that what Mr Bandaranayke did they could do” [ibid: 2]. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Shan felt that this “reformism and revisionism [of these official left parties] really spring from their class character”. As he further noted:

Most of the left leaders were not only intellectuals but came from rich families (some of them feudal) who could afford to send their sons to Europe for higher studies. On their return, these men accumulated a fair amount of capital from whose investment they were able to lead a comfortable life...It is this contradiction of being wedded to big capital and at the same time pretending to espouse the cause of the working class and to stand for the abolition of the very source of wealth that gave them their own comfortable life (that) characterises most of the left leadership [ibid: 9-10].

He had added rather cynically, “These people played at revolution. Revolution was not in their class interest” [ibid].

### The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna

Perhaps it was because he had been partly blamed for the emergence of the JVP that Shan turned out to be one of its most insightful and far-sighted critic. As noted earlier, the JVP insurrection against the centre-left United Front government in the early 1970s resulted in the wholesale slaughter of the thousands of rural Sinhala youth and was the biggest bloodbath in the modern history of Sri Lanka. In his writings, Shan portrayed the insurrection as a misguided and badly planned adventure and was even quite convinced that it was a plot by Soviet and other revisionist forces to oppose the growing influence of Maoism in Sri Lanka.

He was however careful to speak of its accomplishments as well as its errors [ibid: 199]. Shan located the JVP insurrection in the context of the growing impoverishment and unemployment of predominantly rural Sinhala youth in the south who had not only become disenchanted with the record of successive governments, but also with the promises made by the recently elected centre-left United Front government. It was this disgruntlement that Rohan Wijeyeweera and his small cohort of lieutenants were able to use to manipulate and mobilise youths. Arguing that the JVP ideology was essentially a romantic and petit-bourgeois ideology much like that of Che Guevara with whom they identified, Shan argued that the JVP:

popularised the theory ... that a relatively small group of armed bravaoes ... could capture the state machine and afterwards attract the people to itself; and that this could be done irrespective of the maturity or otherwise of the revolutionary situation in a given country ... and without a revolutionary party to lead the people [ibid: 199].

Thus the focus of Shan’s powerful critique of the JVP was on its leadership with its “ridiculous personality cult”, its lack of “democratic centralism” and the way it “lent itself to be manipulated by reaction” [ibid: 201] and thus ended up largely as a counter-revolutionary movement. However, for Shan, its rank and file members were “honestly revolutionary minded with a sense of dedication...willing to sacrifice even their lives – unheard of before in Ceylon”. He had, however, concluded, “The pity is that such sacrifice was in vain” [ibid: 200]. Thus for Shan the JVP insurrection was one of the greatest misadventures and lost opportunities of modern Sri Lankan history, but yet reflected

even in its utter failure and its counter-revolutionary end was “the genuine desire of the youth for revolutionary change”, and the general “breakdown of the faith in bourgeois parliamentary democracy” [ibid: 200-02].

One of the major outcomes of the insurrection was that the government was able to utilise the opportunity to suppress all the genuine revolutionary forces in the country. Thousands were arrested. Shan along with many left party and trade union leaders were arrested and held in detention for nearly a year on charges of suspicion of involvement. While Shan has offered one of the most insightful analysis of the early JVP insurrection which certainly warrants further study, what is more pertinent to the present discussion is his analysis and foresight concerning the later transformation of the JVP as a virulently anti-Tamil Sinhala/Buddhist “neo-fascist” movement.

Though Shan had observed that the JVP had been a “racialist” party from its inception (especially in its treatment of the plantation Tamils), it was only after being banned on suspicion after the 1983 pogrom that he felt that it had become dangerously anti-Tamil. As he explains:

It was during this period of illegality that the JVP went back to its former communalism and emerged as the most racist of the Sinhala parties ... In fact, the JVP provided the ideological leadership to the anti-Tamil chauvinist movement which was at the same time anti-UNP. This enabled it to draw near the SLFP and even attract to itself the support and sympathy of the rank and file of the SLFP as well as sections of the more chauvinist Buddhist clergy. It was a combination of these forces that joined together to form the defence of the Motherland Organisation in order to oppose the president’s proposal for provincial councils...It was the JVP that provided the theoretical leadership to this movement.<sup>17</sup>

Viewing the JVP brand of communalism as particularly dangerous since it is so “mixed up with the left impulse,” Shan observed, “Having risen from the left, Wijeyaweera is using the current volatile communal atmosphere in Sri Lanka to promote a neo-fascist tendency – much in the way Mussolini did in Italy” [“JVP and Tamils”: 6]. It was in this sense that Shan saw the JVP as particularly hostile to the Tamil struggle for self-determination:

The JVP’s hatred of the Tamils and the armed struggle of the militants is almost paranoid ... Their strategy is not that of revolution but a military putsch, carried out by the lower ranks of the armed forces and supported by the Buddhist clergy ... The JVP is an anti-working class, anti-Tamil, counter revolutionary and potentially fascist force [ibid: 7].

It is indeed difficult to believe that Shan could have made this far-sighted prediction before his death in 1993, long before the JVP had reached its apotheosis in its campaign against the Tamil right to self-determination. It certainly confirms Shan’s capacity for astute and far-sighted analysis.

### On the Ethnic Conflict and Tamil Separatism

Shan’s perspective on the rise of Sinhala/Buddhist chauvinism and the ethnic crisis is quite consistent with his overall analysis of the trajectory of the modern Sri Lankan history. Clearly placing the blame at the doorstep of Sri Lanka’s pro-imperialist and neo-colonial ruling classes, Shan had once observed rather pointedly, “It has to be noted that the neo-colonial domination over Sri Lanka and

the problem of the Tamil-speaking minorities continue to be at the heart of Sri Lankan politics” [Sanmugathasan 1989: 286]. Thus, for Shan the scapegoating and oppression of the Tamils was simply the latest in a series of manoeuvres by which the Sri Lankan ruling elites sought to deflect attention away from their neo-colonialist policies that served only themselves and their foreign masters while denuding the country of its resources and impoverishing the masses.

Shan had quite astutely traced the rise of Sinhala/Buddhist nationalism to the early 1920s when he felt that the earlier class and caste alliances of the Sinhala and Tamil elites had begun to fracture in the context of the increasing devolution of power by the British.<sup>18</sup> Thus, for Shan, even the language crisis had been produced by this worsening economic crisis and unemployment among the majority Sinhala community. As he explains:

...the economic issues were at the bottom of the language crisis. Before 1956, knowledge of the English language had been the passport to service under the government....Compelled by the pressure of unemployment the Sinhalese wanted Sinhala only to be the official language – thus giving them the best chance of service under the government. Because in a non-industrialised country like Sri Lanka, government...is also the most gainful occupation, the battle of the languages was in reality a battle for government jobs for the respective middle classes. That is also the reason why no solution other than an economic one can ever bring lasting results [Sanmugathasan 1989: 105].

It is evident that Shan here is pointing to the complex conjuncture of economic woes and incipient Sinhala/Buddhist chauvinism that began in earnest with the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) victory and proceeded to harness and exploit the ideology of Sinhala/Buddhist “race” as the true “sons of the soil” and periodically utilised the anti-Tamil pogromist violence as a way of both unifying the Sinhala masses and deflecting them away from rebellion or class struggle. It is a phenomenon and trajectory that has since been well-documented by scholars such as Kumari Jeyawardena, N Shanmugaratnam, A Sivanandan and Stanley Tambiah.<sup>19</sup>

Shan’s perceptive and far-sighted analysis of the rise of Sinhala/Buddhist nationalism and the subsequent oppression of the Tamils did not, however, translate into support for Tamil nationalism. Instead, Shan appears to have been quite content to merely critique both Sinhala/Buddhist nationalism and what he regarded as the narrow bourgeois-Tamil nationalism that had sprung up in opposition. In fact, he was quite reluctant to even concede the status of a distinct nationality to the Tamil-speaking people.<sup>20</sup> Even during the brutal and heavy-handed state repression of the Tamils in the late 1970s, Shan had remained largely silent and failed to take any concrete action. His failure on this issue is particularly striking given the fact that a number of his own senior party leaders and cadres had repeatedly called for such an intervention.<sup>21</sup>

### Turning Point

The 1983 pogrom against the Tamils was clearly a decisive turning point for Shan. Having personally witnessed the carnage, apparently from an upstairs window in Colombo, he had become finally convinced not only of the extent of state collusion in the

violence, but also of the incredible gulf that had been created as a result between the two communities. It was from this point on that Shan adopted a much more sympathetic if not strident reading of Tamil militancy, and indeed, the Tamil struggle for self-determination. On the first anniversary of the 1983 carnage, as if echoing his own conversion experience, he had observed:

The anti-Tamil holocaust of July 1983, in which nearly 2000 Tamils died while thousands of others lost their houses and property... Most Tamils finally lost the hope that they could ever peacefully live among the Sinhalese as equals. That many of them are still living among the Sinhalese is true. But they are living as second class citizens – in perpetual fear of another holocaust [Vehujan and Imayavaramban 1994: p 5].

Despite this about-turn, Shan still clung on to his critique of the politics of the Tamil bourgeois parliamentary parties but now placed the turning point of the Tamil struggle to the realisation by the radical Tamil youth that the bourgeoisie parliamentary parties despite their defiant rhetoric constituted an impotent and bankrupt force. He thus presented the Tamil struggle and its gradual transformation into a violent armed struggle as an inevitable outcome given the long history of oppression endured by the Tamils. His only major reservation was that the Tamil youth did not adequately study or follow the Marxist-Leninist path of a liberation struggle. As he explains:

It is true that, for pragmatic reasons they first resorted to armed struggle and thereafter went in search of an ideology that would justify such action. Naturally they found it in Marxism-Leninism. There is nothing wrong in this except that most of the Tamil militant groups did not seem to have studied Marxism-Leninism sufficiently and deeply.<sup>22</sup>

Thus after decades of ignoring the legitimate basis for a Tamil struggle, after the 1983 pogrom, Shan began publicly endorsing the Tamil militant struggle. Defending such a position at the first anniversary of the 1983 pogrom, he observed:

The Marxist-Leninist attitude to individual terrorism is quite clear. We do not support it because it is based fundamentally on romantic and petit-bourgeois ideology which is characterised by a lack of faith in the masses. It places its main reliance on a brand of swashbuckling ‘Three Musketeers’ type of bravado...But at the same time, the phenomenon of terrorism must be examined in the context from which it arose. We cannot make a blanket condemnation of terrorism. Otherwise, we would be like the Israelis who condemn the Palestinian Liberation Organisation as a terrorist organisation. The militant youth of Jaffna took to terrorism because of the repression and the harassment practised by the predominantly Sinhala army [Sanmugathasan 1984].

This rather carefully worded support for Tamil youth militancy after decades of inaction did not mean that Shan was uncritical in his support. What distinguished Shan’s support from many of his left contemporaries was that not only did he now endorse the militant struggle but urged that any criticisms of them should only be made “while standing on the same side of the barricades” as the militants. He made this clear while writing of the struggle of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) against the Indian Peace Keeping Force:

The LTTE has made tactical blunders in both policy and practice. But they are fighting the main enemy, the Indian expansionists. Any criticisms of the LTTE, therefore, must be made while standing

on the same side of the barricades as the LTTE [Sanmugathasan 1989: 287].

It is also against this context that one needs to read Shan's critique of the stance taken by the Indian parliamentary left towards the Tamil struggle. As in the case of Sri Lanka, Shan blamed the Indian left's statist, if not Indian nationalist orientation for their capitulation to majoritarian parliamentary politics. For Shan, this "revisionism" of the Indian left was (this is a passive voice I deleted) due to the influence of "revisionist" left forces from a very early stage. This occurred first, as he noted, under the influence of the British "revisionist" communist parties, and later, under the influence of the Russian "revisionist" leadership which as he points out had even gone to the extraordinary extent of ordering the Indian communists to support Indira Gandhi during her notorious emergency rule in the mid-1970s.<sup>23</sup> During the worsening ethnic conflict and the signing of the Indo-Lanka accord, Shan chose to lash out against the official left in India:

It was therefore no surprise to us that over the Sri Lankan question both the communist parties of India blindly supported Rajiv Gandhi without fulfilling the international duty of supporting the interests of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority and its working classes... both the Indian communist parties along with the Sri Lankan revisionist parties have issued a joint statement not only praising the JR-Rajiv accord, but also calling for its strict implementation, including the surrender of their weapons by the militant groups. There is, of course... no mention of the plight of the Tamils who have fallen from the frying pan into the fire. There is also no condemnation of the thousands of innocent people killed or of other atrocities ('The Sri Lankan Problem and the Indian Communists', pp 5-6).

Shan's increasingly critical stance on left's position on the Tamil struggle and his increasing endorsement of Tamil militancy was at the same time accompanied by criticisms, especially of the methods and policies adopted by the Tamil militants. Shan was essentially interested in moving Tamil militancy toward what he envisioned as a full-fledged liberationist struggle. He had, for example, observed:

From the beginning, the militant groups committed serious tactical errors. In the first place they were not united. Five major groups sprang up and constantly collided with each other. Because of this disunity, the Indian secret service (RAW) was able to influence them and use one group against the other and thus weaken all groups. Secondly they did not learn the lessons taught by Mao about how to conduct people's war. They also refused to arm the people and make them participate in a people's war. The political maturity of the militants was very low although some of them mouthed Marxist slogans... They reversed Mao's teaching that the gun must never be allowed to command the party; the party must always command the gun.<sup>24</sup>

This rather perceptive criticism of Tamil youth militancy certainly indicates that Shan was not simply overcompensating for his earlier reluctance to endorse the Tamil struggle.

Shan was also particularly wary of India using the ethnic conflict towards its own expansionist aims. He observed that "...it is now clear that India's support to the Tamil militants was given with the ulterior motive of using them to destabilise Sri Lanka and help bring about India's hegemony in Sri Lanka" [Get the Troops Out of India, p 6]. It is in this context that he

seems to have cultivated a particular appreciation of the LTTE's independent and self-reliant orientation:

The LTTE despite its many mistakes, is the only force in the field that is resolutely standing up to fighting the fourth largest army in the world... Of the other militant groups, except PLOTE, all other groups like the EPRLF, TELO, ENDLF, etc, have sold themselves into bondage to the Indian expansionists and have become not only their agents, but even their informers. This treachery will neither be forgotten nor forgiven by the Tamil people [Sanmugathasan 1989: 286].

Shan's preference for the more nationalistic LTTE, over the more left-oriented groups such as the Elam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and Elam National Democratic Liberation Front (ENDLF) is certainly surprising. Aside from the Indian factor that may have influenced his preferences, it may point to the fact that Shan was not entirely persuaded by the Marxist credentials of the more left-oriented militant groups such as the EPRLF and ENDLF.

Shan's endorsement of Tamil militancy did not mean he favoured separation. He now felt that the path to unity lay in first recognising the Tamil right to self-determination.<sup>25</sup> For Shan, once this recognition is conceded, the demand for a separate state could become less insistent ('The National Problem or the Problem of the National Minorities', pp 20-21). The solution would certainly not be possible under the neocolonial political culture of the two major political parties in Sri Lanka – the UNP and the SLFP. It would lie ultimately in uniting the Sinhala and Tamil revolutionary forces as it was after all "...the masses of the Sinhalese and the Tamils who are paying the price for the costly war against the Tamils. The billions of rupees spent on this costly war against fellow citizens do not come out of the pockets of either Jayewardene or Athulathmudali" [ibid: 21-23].

It was also in this very same language that Shan spelled out his solution for Sri Lanka's agony:

The winning of the right of self-determination is part of Sri Lanka's democratic revolution which must bring together the revolutionary forces from among both the Sinhalese and the Tamils, particularly workers, peasants and radical intelligentsia – irrespective of language, caste or creed [ibid].

### Concluding Remarks

It is evident from this brief survey of Shan's writings that his analysis and observations on the trajectory of modern Sri Lankan history and the ethnic crisis certainly deserve attention. Though scholars have since his time elaborated if not fine-tuned some of his insights, this often has been at the expense of the powerful and unified perspective on Sri Lanka's postcolonial history that Shan's own writings present. Of the three or four recurring themes in his writings, perhaps the most resonant is, his insistent emphasis on the unusually pro-imperialist and comprador nature of Sri Lanka's ruling elite. It is in this context that we need to read Shan's rather astute observation that the "neo-colonial domination over Sri Lanka and the problem of the Tamil-speaking minorities continue to be at the heart of Sri Lankan politics". Certainly the haste with which both the UNP and SLFP-led governments have used the slogan "war against terror" and "war to preserve the motherland" to unleash harsh and authoritarian rule,

slash social services, break up strikes and the power of labour unions, privatise former state enterprises and essentially open up Sri Lanka to foreign neo-imperialist capital appears to confirm Shan's rather critical view of the politics of Sri Lanka's two main national parties. Similarly, his analysis and critique of the JVP, particularly in its later manifestation as an anti-Tamil neo-fascist organisation appears to be an extremely bold and far-sighted observation.

Though Shan provides a persuasive argument for endorsing the Tamil militant struggle at the same time as he provides an excellent critique of some of the methods and tactics of the Tamil militants, he leaves unanswered the question of how precisely to address the contradictions between a movement impelled primarily by nationalism, albeit of a defensive kind, and the struggle for national liberation. These limitations, however, should not detract from appreciating Shan's insightful and far-sighted commentary on the tragic fate of Sri Lanka's postcolonial history.

[A longer unmodified version of this paper is due to appear in a booklet form in the Social Scientist Association publication, Colombo, Sri Lanka. I would like to thank the following friends for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper, N Thambirajah, N Shanmugaratnam, S Sivasegaram, Mark Gabbert, Henry Heller and J Uyangoda. Special thanks to V Thanabalasingham and P Thambirajah for their invaluable assistance with sources for this paper.]

Email: rvaitheespara@shaw.ca

#### NOTES

- Several scholars have noted what appears to be this paradoxical economic growth. Some arguing that the civil war itself has become an important vehicle of economic growth. See Winslow and Woost 2004.
- I have pointed this change in the approach to the conflict in my earlier article. See Vaitheespara 2006.
- A trend best exemplified in the work of Daniel, 1996.
- The basic argument advanced here is that the Sri Lankan policymakers did not free themselves from euro-centric epistemological categories and modes of governance when negotiating Sri Lanka's difficult transition to modernity. I am thinking here of the recent works on postcolonial Sri Lanka and the conflict by scholars such as Qadri Ismail and David Scott.
- Aside from a few brief sketches of his life and a couple of critical essays on him in Tamil, there is no substantial essay or monograph length work devoted to Sanmugathasan in the English language. See N Shanmugaratnam, 1990; Vehujan and I mayavaramban (1994).
- Panikkar had suggested this in his early work. See K M Panikkar, 1959.
- As is now well known the Sri Lankan left had not only played a significant and progressive role in the formative period of post-independent Sri Lankan history, but was also the staunchest defender of Sri Lanka's minority nationalities. It had only capitulated to Sinhala/Buddhist nationalism from around the early 1960s when it began to embrace the politics of coalition and advocate the parliamentary path to socialism in its quest for political power.
- Shan's father hailed originally from Jaffna and had worked as a rubber-maker in a rubber estate. See N Sanmugathasan, 1989.
- The origin of the left movement and its first official political party the Lanka Sama Samaja Party is traced to the early 1930s when a loose coalition of individuals with nationalist as well as left orientations came together to form a political organisation. Many of its prominent early leaders had been educated abroad in the west where they had been first exposed to and came under the influence of anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, nationalist and Marxist currents of thought.
- In his *Memoirs* Shan describes his frequent visits and easy familiarity with communist leaders in places such as the Soviet Union, Europe, India, China and Albania including his memorable meeting with Mao. See, *Political Memoirs*, pp 73-80.
- Shan devotes a whole chapter to explaining this split in his *Memoirs*. See, *Political Memoirs*, pp 134-56. While the international reasons for the split is well known and recounted by Shan himself, there may have been local reasons for the split. The local impetus for the split may have been dissatisfaction within the party over the increasing communalisation of the party partly as a result of the parliamentary tendency in the party (N Shanmugaratnam, personal communication). Shanmugaratnam at that time was a member of a student socialist body at the University of Peradeniya which was allied to the Communist Party. He recounts that during this split, some members supporting the Moscow wing of the party had both secretly and openly attacked Shan on a communal basis, based on his Tamil ethnicity.
- Shan describes his party's attempts in this direction including his organisation of the Red Flag Union in detail. See *Political Memoirs*, pp 159-70.

- He describes this in some detail in, the section 'The Struggle Against Caste' in *Political Memoirs*, pp 159-70.
- His articles appeared mostly in the two party weeklies, *Kamkaruwa* and *Thozhilali*, at one time. The former was briefly a daily (S Sivasegaram, personal communications).
- Most of these essays are unpublished handwritten essays, some have been translated in Tamil and published by the Shanmugathasan Centre for Marxist Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka. See for example, N Shanmugathasan, *The Life and Teachings of Karl Marx* (Essays on Marx and Marxist theory in English and Tamil) Shanmugathasan Centre for Marxist Studies, Colombo, 2002, also N Shanmugathasan, *Sanmugathasan Katturaikal* (Shanmugathasan's Essays). Shanmugathasan Centre for Marxist Studies, Colombo, 2003.
- N Sanmugathasan, 'Fifty Years of the Left Movement' hand written unpublished paper, p 1. This essay has been translated and published in Tamil. See N Shanmugathasan, 2003.
- N Sanmugathasan, 'JVP and the Tamils', unpublished handwritten essay, pp 5-6.
- It began with the fight over communal versus territorial representation that broke out between the Tamil and Sinhala elites in the early 1920s. See N Sanmugathasan, 'National Problem or the Problem of National Minorities', unpublished handwritten essay, pp 10-11.
- See for example the classic works of this kind, Jayawardena (2003); Tamil, Samuthiran (alias N Shanmugaratnam) (1983). or Stanley Tambiah's famous work, *Buddhism Betrayed?*
- See N Sanmugathasan, 1972, p 64. He had argued that the Tamils do not fulfil the five-point requirements set out by Stalin. Though his coverage of the modern period in the work is quite innovative and original, what is troubling is his rather poor coverage of the pre-colonial history of Sri Lanka that only serves to affirm the Sinhala/Buddhist master narrative of Sri Lankan history.
- See Vehujan and I mayavaramban, 1994, pp 19-20. Though conceding Shan's many achievements, these writers are critical of what they feel was Shan's rather authoritarian and bookish tendencies during the latter part of his career. They argue that these tendencies contributed to his ineffectiveness at this crucial juncture.
- N Sanmugathasan, 'Ethnic Problem of Sri Lanka', unpublished essay, p 4.
- N Sanmugathasan, 'The Sri Lankan Problem and the Indian Communists!' (private unpublished paper), p 5.
- N Sanmugathasan, 'Get the Indian Troops Out of India! Recognise the Right of Self Determination of the Tamil People', unpublished essay, pp 4-6.
- N Sanmugathasan, 'The National Problem or the Problem of the National Minorities', unpublished essay, p 20.

#### REFERENCES

- Daniel, Valentine E (1996): *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Jayawardena, Kumari (2003): *Ethnic and Class Conflict in Sri Lanka*, Sanjiva Books (6th printing), Colombo.
- Panikkar, K M (1959): *Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of the Vasco da Gama Epoch of Asian History, 1498-1945*, Allen and Unwin, London.
- Samuthiran (alias N Shanmugaratnam) (1983): *IlankaiDesiya Inap Prachanai (The Ethnic Problem of Sri Lanka)*, Kavya and Padigal Publishers, Bangalore.
- Sanmugathasan, N (1972): *A Marxist Looks at the History of Ceylon*, Sarasavi Printers, Colombo.
- (1984): 'Sri Lanka: The Story of the Holocaust', *Race and Class: A Journal for Black and Third World Liberation*, London, 26, No 1, pp 63-82, 81-82.
  - (1989): *Political Memoirs of an Unrepentant Communist*, Lake House, Colombo.
  - (2002): *The Life and Teachings of Karl Marx*, Shanmugathasan Centre for Marxist Studies, Colombo (in both English and Tamil).
  - (2003): *Sanmugathasan Katturaikal (Sanmugathasan's Essays)*, Shanmugathasan Centre for Marxist Studies, Colombo (Tamil).
- Shanmugaratnam, N (alias Samuthiran) (1983): 'Ilankai Desiya Inap Prachanai' (The Ethnic Problem of Sri Lanka), Kavya and Padigal Publishers, Bangalore.
- (1990): 'Book Review: Political Memoirs of an Unrepentant Communist by N Sanmugathasan (Lake House, Colombo, 1989)', *Race and Class*, 1, Vol 31, pp 89-92.
- Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja (1992): *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka* (a monograph of the World Institute for Development Economics Research), University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Vaitheespara, Ravi (2006): 'Beyond 'Benign' and 'Fascist' Nationalisms: Interrogating the Historiography of Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol XXIX, No 3, December, pp 435-58.
- Vehujan and I mayavaramban (1994): *Communism Iyakkaththil Thozhar Sanmugathasan: Vimarsana Kannotam (Sanmugathasan's Role in the Communist Movement: A Critical Appraisal)*, Puthiya Poomi Publications and South Asian Books, Madras, pp 19-20.
- Winslow, Deborah and Michael D Woost (eds) (2004): *Economy, Culture and Civil War in Sri Lanka*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indianapolis.

## Economic&PoliticalWEEKLY

available at

**Delhi Magazine Distributors Pvt Ltd**

110, Bangla Sahib Marg

New Delhi - 110 001

Phone number 011 - 41561062/63