

Lest We Forget
Missed Opportunities in Sri Lanka

In 1926, the scion of one of the Sinhalese feudal families of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) suggested that a federal system of three states be established on the island in the three Kingdoms – two Sinhalese and one Tamil - that had been in existence during pre-colonial times. Had those proposals been accepted, the island would have flourished. The people of the island would have lived in harmony, without a war that has killed an estimated 200,000, without civilians suffering abduction, torture, rape and other atrocities, and without the physical destruction that has taken place. Instead, politicians found that arousing racial hatred would bring political benefits to them.

Discrimination, colonization & violence against Tamils

Even before independence from colonial rule in 1948, the Sinhalese government minister for agriculture started state-aided settlement of Tamil areas with Sinhalese people and built Buddhist temples, mainly in the Tamil-majority Eastern province. The percentage of Sinhalese in the province doubled from 4% in 1924 to 9% in 1947. Planned settlements under several publicly funded irrigation schemes and the driving away of Tamils and Muslims from their traditional lands increased the percentage of Sinhalese to the current figure of about 32%. Some place names have been changed to Sinhalese and Buddhist temples have also been built in those areas.

Soon after independence a Sinhala national anthem was introduced and the Sinhala lion flag was adopted as the national flag in Ceylon. Following agitation by minority Tamils and Muslims, eventually two small vertical stripes were introduced to represent the two groups. A Sinhalese minister threatened that if any change to the original design was made, he would climb up the flag pole and bring the flag down.

After independence and the Westminster-style first-past-the-post electoral system was adopted, Sinhalese had almost 70% of the elected parliamentarians. The new administration appointed Sinhalese to government jobs, the main form of employment at the time. The military consists of 98% Sinhalese and the police are 95% even today, much higher than the Sinhalese portion of the island's population. In addition, most senior administrative positions were given to Sinhalese, even in the Tamil areas.

When vehicle licence plates had English letters – the link language - replaced by the Sinhala letter ‘Sri,’ the Tamils and Muslims (most of whom spoke Tamil) protested. Thugs encouraged by politicians, police and Buddhist clergy then painted over Tamil words appearing on street signs and other public signs. Anyone who objected to their activities was beaten up.

One of the first laws passed after independence was to disenfranchise the Tamils of more recent Indian origin, who had voted in the first general election held after independence. These Tamils had been brought by the British to work on tea and rubber plantations in the central hill country and had been living in Ceylon for several

generations. They numbered more than a million at that time and Tamil representation in parliament was decreased by over 40%. This disenfranchisement was one of the reasons for the formation of a new Tamil political party – the Federal Party (FP). Following an agreement with India, 525,000 of these people and their natural increase were taken by India and 375,000 and their natural increase taken by Ceylon. The fate of the remaining 100,000 people was to be resolved later. These people, who were born and raised in Ceylon, were reluctant to move to India, a country they did not know. Those who protested were assaulted by hoodlums with no police protection whatsoever.

During the 1956 election campaign, the candidate for Prime Minister of the UNP made a major speech in Jaffna, the cultural capital of the Tamils. He said that if he won, he would make both languages, Sinhalese and Tamil, the official languages of the country. His opponent, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike saw his opportunity and tried to rouse the communal and religious feelings of the Sinhalese people. He put forward the policy that the island belonged to the Sinhalese and that he would make Sinhalese the only official language of the country, replacing English. He won the election with the support of the Buddhists, who form the majority of the Sinhalese people, and Buddhist priests. Some senior leftist politicians warned him: “One language, two countries; two languages, one country.”

Tamil parliamentarians demonstrated outside the Parliament against the implementation of Sinhalese as the only official language and they were beaten up by hoodlums and the State police. This started the first of several pogroms against the Tamils culminating in the one in 1983, which was of genocidal proportions. Over 4,000 Tamils were killed in 1983 and millions of dollars’ worth of property destroyed. The war then started as a war against State terror and for liberation. It must be noted that once the war began in earnest, mob attacks against Tamils also ceased.

After the introduction of Sinhalese as the only official language, Tamils who were already employed in government departments were deprived of their salary increments unless they passed tests to show proficiency in Sinhalese. The language was not even in the academic curriculum in Tamil areas when these future government workers went to primary and secondary schools.

Missed Opportunities

In 1957, and later in 1965, the leader of the Tamils, after negotiations with prime ministers of the two major Sinhalese parties in power at the time, signed pacts to solve the ethnic problem through devolution of power to the provinces or districts. Both pacts were later unilaterally abrogated by the Sinhalese Prime Ministers. Had they implemented either of these agreements, all the subsequent deaths and destruction would have been avoided.

In the 1958 pogrom against the Tamils, they were massacred in the Sinhalese provinces in the South, where their houses were burnt, people tortured and women raped. More

than 100,000 Tamils fled for their lives from the South to their traditional homelands in the Northeast after gathering in temporary refugee camps.

The government introduced a new scheme in the field of higher education in 1970 by which Tamil students were set higher standards than Sinhalese to enter universities.

In 1972, a new Constitution was adopted that changed the country's name to Sri Lanka, a Sinhalese name, and deleted clauses that existed to safeguard minority rights. The Senate (Upper House in Parliament) was abolished altogether and, also, the right to appeal to the Privy Council of the United Kingdom on decisions of the Supreme Court. Buddhism was given pride of place in a country which had significant populations of Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Tamil Parliamentarians did not participate in the drafting of the Constitution or its adoption.

In 1974, police violence was unleashed at the World Tamil Research Conference held in Jaffna, killing nine people and wounding many.

In 1976, Sinhalese police shot at a mosque killing many Tamil-speaking Muslims.

In 1977, the UNP government unleashed mob violence against Tamils, mostly those working in the tea and rubber plantations, killing hundreds. Nearly 40,000 of them became refugees and many fled to India and to the Tamil homelands. Over 100 Hindu temples were destroyed.

In 1978, the Prevention of Terrorism Act was enacted, described at that time by an International Jurist as the worst of its kind in the world, including South Africa enacted. The act allowed the armed forces to arrest and kill Tamils without magisterial inquiry and then bury their bodies, which they proceeded to do with vigor. Violence by Sinhalese and Muslim homeguards was also unleashed on the Tamils, while the country has been under Emergency Rule most of the time since independence.

The government introduced yet another new Constitution in 1978, again without the participation of Tamils in drafting or passing it in the assembly. This Constitution created the all-powerful position of Executive President. While political leaders from all parties speak of the need to abolish the executive presidency because of its unfettered powers, once a President gets elected, he or she ignores the issue for obvious reasons. A section in the constitution makes it an offence even to speak about separation or partition of the country. Many of the Tamil Parliamentarians went into exile in India at this time.

In 1981, the Sinhalese armed forces and police went on a rampage in Jaffna. This was carried out under the supervision of two senior ministers of the government, Cyril Mathew and Gamini Dissanayake. The Sinhalese mob went about killing people and burning buildings, including the esteemed Public Library in the cultural capital of the Tamils. The library had over 95,000 rare books and irreplaceable manuscripts. Business buildings and the house of the Member of Parliament were also burnt down. Tamils were chased out of some villages, the names of villages were changed to Sinhalese names, and

Sinhalese people were settled in those villages. Plantation Tamils who had taken refuge in the Northeast earlier were forcibly put into buses and taken to the Central Province. Tamil students of the Peradeniya University in the Central Province were attacked. Many Tamils were arrested, tortured and made to disappear.

In 1983, a pogrom of genocidal proportions took place during which more than 4,000 innocent Tamils were killed, and their residences and business destroyed, along with 95% of Tamil industrial property. 53 Tamil political prisoners were killed by fellow prisoners and their prison guards. The civil war started after this pogrom and continued for over twenty-five years.

Search and destroy missions led to arrests of innocent Tamils, who were tortured, raped, disappeared and killed. The mass grave at Chemmani in Jaffna district, for instance, is believed to hold more than 400 bodies of civilians killed after the army's 1985 takeover of Jaffna, according to a soldier who was one of the accused in the atrocities. These deliberate killings, along with the indiscriminate shelling and bombing of Tamil areas, led to over 125,000 Tamil civilian deaths in the war.

Destruction of residences, forced occupation of houses, schools, hospitals, and places of worship by the army and its paramilitaries made life in Tamil areas untenable. Many Tamils were driven out of their homes and the areas in which they lived were designated High Security Zones. These people, whether they were farmers or fishermen, lost their livelihoods. Despite a Supreme Court decision that the displaced people should return to their original residences, the ruling has not been implemented.

As if this was not enough, the Sinhalese government imposed an economic embargo on essential food and medicinal items on Tamil areas. This in itself is a war crime.

No wonder the Sinhalese government is barring NGOs and international officials from entering the Tamil areas. Obviously, it has a lot to hide.

During her election campaign, ex-President Chandrika Bandaranaike said that “the Tamils have suffered so much that more than 800,000 have become external refugees and about a million are internally displaced, many of them multiple number of times!” This is out of an estimated total of 3.25 million Tamil people.

It is to be hoped that the same mistakes will not continue to be made by the present government. Tamils need physical security, a viable political voice, equality in public life for their political views, their language and their religions, and respect for their unique and proud culture.