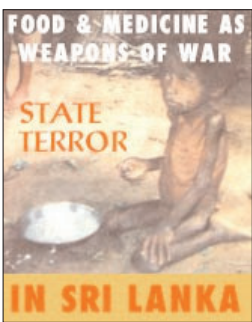


While South Asia is seized with upheaval of ethnic Indians in Malaysia, the plight of Upcountry Tamils in Sri Lanka also warrants urgent attention



Northeast and Upcountry Tamils had by then been alerted to the danger of Sinhalese racism and were against mass deportation. Under the agreement, 375,000 Upcountry Tamils were to be given Ceylon citizenship, which was done at a snail's pace. The Srimavo government was brazenly racist and evicted the estate Tamils under one pretext or the other. They nationalised the estates and uprooted the Tamils. During repeated anti-Tamil riots, they were chased out of their homes. Consequently, some of them sought refuge in the Northeast. The Tamil refugees from the estates were trying to make a living in the remote areas of Northeast, but many were again mercilessly attacked and uprooted by the Sinhalese army. The Sinhalese population was resettled in occupied lands.

Common suffering of Northeast and Upcountry Tamils

The Tamils of both Northeast and the Upcountry were bound by the common suffering at the hands of the Sinhala state and pre-meditated mob terror. They were made refugees in their own homeland. This common suffering united the Tamils.

Triumvirate of TULF leaders

The Federal Party, the Ceylon Tamil Congress and the Ceylon Workers Congress were united into the Tamil United Liberation Front in 1976 and Thondaiman along with G. G. Ponnambalam and Chelvanayagam were elected as leaders. In the same year, at a TULF convention in Vaddukkoddai, presided over by Thanthai Chelva, a historic resolution calling for the formation of a separate state of Tamil Eelam covering the Northern and Eastern provinces was passed. However, when TULF decided to agitate for separation,

Thondaiman chose a different path that he thought would help his own estate community.

Thondaiman's Re-entry into Parliament

In 1960 and 1965 Thondaiman was appointed Member of Parliament to represent the stateless Tamils as they had been earlier disenfranchised. Constitutionally, it was possible to appoint members from unrepresented peoples. When the number of Tamils registered as citizens increased, their influence in elections was felt. In 1971, after 30 years, he again won an election through Tamil votes in Nuwara Eliya. In 1978 he was appointed as cabinet minister of Rural Industries. From then on, he invariably held a ministerial post till his death. He used his ministerial position to uplift the economic position of the estate people and to regain lost rights. In 1994 the CWC secured nine seats in Parliament and became a force to reckon with.

Anti Tamil hostility

In the ethnic violence of 1977 and 1980, plantation Tamils were again the worst affected. As a result of recurring ethnic violence many plantation Tamils had taken refuge in the Northeast and settled down there as farm hands. During the 1983 massacre of the Tamils many fled to India and the Tamil homeland of Northeast Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese politicians used the armed forces to uproot them. The Gandhiyam Movement which was looking after their welfare was crushed and organizers like Dr. Rajasundaram and Architect David were arrested.

Thondaiman extracts concessions

Thondaiman used his political and ministerial position to win back some of the rights of his oppressed people. They were successful in extracting their civic rights. Wages were also increased due to trade union action. Thondaiman succeeded because he was a master strategist and used his cabinet position to obtain concessions. He used



the strength of the CWC trade unions to pressurize the government and estate employers. He used the Tamil vote bank in local, parliamentary and presidential elections. He used the voting power of the CWC in Parliament to influence the formation of governments. He came to be regarded as king maker, much to the chagrin of die-hard Sinhalese leaders. In 1988 the UNP government of Premadasa passed an Act to grant citizenship to Upcountry Tamils, who had been rendered stateless, after their mass deportation under the infamous Srimavo-Shastri Pact.

Northeast rebellion helps Upcountry Tamils

Significantly, the Sinhalese government's fear of the armed resistance in Northeast helped Thondaiman. As the estate Tamils were isolated in the central highlands, the Sinhalese would have continued to suppress them. Thondaiman used his influence to prevent the Upcountry Tamil youth from joining the armed rebellion. Such a revolt would have had far-reaching consequences. Nevertheless, the estate youth settled in the Northeast could not be prevented from throwing in their lot with the Eelam Tamils. Many fought and died. However there is no denying the truth that all strategies of Thondaiman and strength of Upcountry Tamils, would have not yielded any result but for the armed threat of Northeast Tamils.

Death and succession

Thondaiman died at the age of 86 in 1999, while he was still a cabinet minister. He was given a well-attended state funeral, perhaps the only

Tamil to be given such a honour. Over a hundred thousand people attended his funeral. Saumiyamoorthy Thondaiman was a dynamic leader of the Upcountry Tamils and was invariably labelled an "uncrowned king." Even before his death, Arumugam Thondaiman - his grandson was recognized as his successor. Young Arumugam became the President of the Ceylon Workers Congress and continues to lead the Upcountry Tamils.

Remnants of Upcountry Tamils granted citizenship

Forced sterilization, expatriation to India, detentions and killings, mob violence and economic disparity effectively dissipated the Upcountry Tamils. In 2003, the Parliament unanimously decided to grant citizenship to the remnants of the Tamils left in the Upcountry numbering 168,141.

It is estimated that that there are about 1.2 million Plantation Tamils mainly in the Central Highlands, but also spread out in the Western and Northeast Provinces. In 1948, they were 12 % of the total population, but now they are estimated to be at only about 5.5 % to 6 %.

Sri Lanka is not a safe place to live as residents have to live with a daily dose of extrajudicial killings, abductions, ransoms and rapes. While the Notheast Tamils are fighting for a separate homeland, the Plantation Tamils are struggling only for economic survival.

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