

India and Sri Lanka Tamils: Crimes in the Name of 'Diplomacy'

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Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 37 (Sep. 14, 1991), pp. 2133-2134

Published by: [Economic and Political Weekly](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41626994>

Accessed: 04-06-2015 10:13 UTC

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religious faith. While it might be simpler to view caste as a Hindu phenomenon, and resort to a conventional explanation that sees conversion as an escape from an oppressive reality, a look at the experience and social practice of other religious groups in India re-emphasises the resilience of caste, not as a religious institution but an institution that structures social relations irrespective of religious faith. This is even more relevant to the present discussion because, the section of dalits in Tsundur who were the target of attack were all Christians. We will consider the case of a dalit Christian woman who joined a convent in order to escape the oppression of belonging to a dalit family in an upper caste village, as well as that of being the eldest daughter in a family of with a dozen odd children to be cared for and nurtured while the parents were away working in the fields. This woman ran away from home and registered herself as a novitiate with the hope that she could escape both caste and gender oppression within the security of the order. During the period of the novitiate training everyone was treated equally and all novitiates, irrespective of their socio-economic background, were expected to do all kinds of work. Once they were through with their training, they were sent to the various centres where their work really began. It was here that the details of their family background, caste and class began to play a major role in the kinds of work assigned to them, and the treatment meted out to them. Also, in an institution that rested on the vow of celibacy, younger nuns from poorer and more disadvantaged backgrounds were constantly open to the accusation of trying to attract the male priests who visited the centre. Caste-based oppression within the church became so intolerable after a point, that the dalits moved out and formed an order of their own. The rigidity of caste is not restricted to this order. The segregation among some Protestant groups in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh is so great that they would rather intermarry with Hindus of their own caste than with Christians of another caste. Even during service in the church, some churches have separate enclosures for dalits who have to stand through the service and receive communion only after the upper castes have left. And this is only to be expected. Christianity after all did not enter or flourish in a vacuum. The socio-historical context that received the faith without doubt shaped and still shapes it. The reasons for mass conversion of dalits to Christianity should be sought in frameworks other than the oft-repeated statement that Christianity (or for that

matter any religion) offers an escape from oppressive institutions. This issue is complex and difficult to articulate. The attempt here is not in any way to condone the evils of one faith but to point to the complexities of our social reality. At a more immediate level it is to say that what is relevant now is not a debate about the 'value' of a faith but a comprehensive understanding of social practice.

The second fact that is again very complex and difficult to articulate without being accused of crudity is the relationship that exists between low caste men and upper caste women. While it is common knowledge that in many areas where upper caste men are away from home managing their businesses, the women have sexual relationships with their men servants, this in itself does not run counter to the caste hierarchy because power and control is vested with the women by virtue of their caste status. It is only when the caste norms are openly flouted by elopement, pregnancy, or discovery, that punitive action becomes necessary. In Muthamma's case the Reddi woman who eloped with the Golla man had had a long relationship with him. It became an issue only when they decided to elope.

The problem of articulation (and indeed understanding) comes when dalit men, having gained access to power, decide to adopt the methods of the upper castes in exercising this power. It is not uncommon to see dalit boys molesting or passing derogatory remarks about upper caste girls—the case of the dalit boy in Krishna district cited at the beginning of

this article is an example—thus getting their own back in threatening the manhood of their oppressors. This, it appears, is inevitable if the reversal of the power structure merely replicates the earlier pattern and is restricted to an exchange in caste status without a radical redefinition of status, power and hierarchy that challenges the very basis of caste and patriarchal structures. What we need to keep clearly before us is the distinction between the violence that is a reaction and often a legitimate response to caste oppression and violence on women of the other caste or community in order to attack or erode its sense of worth which is welded to these definitions of manhood.

It is especially difficult to achieve this in a situation where political organisation itself takes place within the ambit of the structures being challenged and where the focus of political action is the disability that characterises the group. A revolutionary praxis, therefore, while striving towards the undermining of hierarchical structures, must be built on a recognition of caste and gender as twin mediators of oppression from the outset. Unless this is done we will just have the reality of Bodi repeat itself, with the oppressed—whether they are dalits, minorities or women—undermining their own struggle.

[Much of this discussion was initiated at the Second National Workshop on Women and Development held at Bangalore from August 1-10, 1991. We are indebted to K G Kannabiran for providing us with details of the Tsundur massacre.]

## India and Sri Lanka Tamils Crimes in the Name of 'Diplomacy'

Stan Lourdusamy

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*The Indian government effectively used the Sri Lanka Tamils for its purpose of asserting its regional hegemony and dumped them once this purpose was served. And after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, all Sri Lankan Tamils in India, both the repatriates as well as the refugees, have been treated as suspects.*

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FROM day one after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, all the Sri Lankan Tamils presently in India have been made into villains and are being held suspects, in Tamil Nadu in particular and in the southern states in general. They include the four and a half lakh repatriates from the tea-plantations of central Sri Lanka as well as the nearly two lakh political refugees from the north and east. Both of them have a long history of suffering

meted out to them by successive Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan governments.

The repatriates are the descendants of the cheap labour force from Tamil Nadu whom the British colonial rulers shipped to central Lanka in mid-19th century to set up the plantations through which the British monopolised the international tea market right up till recently. Scholars probing into this phase of the starting of the British-owned plantations in Sri Lanka

estimate that as many as 2,000 of these Tamils died of snake bite alone in the process of clearing up the virgin forests into plantations. But that was not any concern of the British. Again, although it was the labour of these Tamils that brought them their fortune and monopoly on tea, the Tamil plantation labourers were kept isolated, illiterate and impoverished. This was crime number one.

Once independence dawned in 1948 without much of a struggle—and by then the demand for Ceylon tea had begun to wane in the international market—the Sinhala-dominated governments wanted the Tamils to go back to India. Although Jawaharlal Nehru refused to even discuss this question, Lal Bahadur Shastri, due to other simultaneous compulsions, entered into a pact with the then Sri Lankan prime minister in 1964 to repatriate two-thirds of the nine lakh Tamil plantation workers. Later in 1974 Indira Gandhi recommitted India to this repatriation. All this was done without the least reference or consultation with the Tamils concerned. In effect, it was forced repatriation. Crime number two.

Then, when the forced repatriation commenced, especially from 1978 onwards, the way they were shipped to India and the way they were received in India was bereft of any sense of humanity. Ironically, the Tamil word used for the repatriates was 'thayagam thirumbuvor' (people returning to their motherland). But what a 'mother' India proved to be to these hapless victims of diplomatic convenience. They were looted by the Indian customs officials in Rameshwaram, and were cheated by merchants, bureaucrats and contractors, who exploited their ignorance and simplicity. Two-thirds of them have either died prematurely or have landed up in the streets of Tamil Nadu. Crime number three.

Coming to the Sri Lankan refugees. The post-independence history of Sri Lanka reveals the process of discrimination and marginalisation of the minority ethnic Tamil population by the majority Sinhala community. The 'Sinhala Only Act' of 1956 and the 'Standardisation Policy' of 1971 dealt the final blow to the place of the Tamil minority community. The Tamils had no other option but to assert themselves, and this assertion took the form of distinct political formations both within the parliamentary democratic system and outside it. As the struggle grew, the 1983 pogrom in Colombo and other places to decimate the economic base of the Tamil community brought thousands upon thousands of refugees

into Tamil Nadu. Housed in camps there, the refugees inflamed Indian Tamil opinion. The militant young men and women were given military training and equipment by the clandestine agencies of the Indian government. Much money was provided by the state government of Tamil Nadu. Both the Congress government at the centre and the AIADMK government in the state vied with each other in openly promoting the Sri Lankan Tamil cause. The Indian government-trained fighters were then encouraged to return home and protect their people. They did prove their mettle insofar as they were able to stall the Sri Lankan army from taking over the Jaffna peninsula.

It was at this point that Sri Lanka sought military assistance from many foreign sources that India disliked—Pakistan, Israel and professional mercenaries from Europe. Each such step was matched with more Indian support to the Tamil militants, until it was made clear to the Sri Lankan government that the latter better accept the 'big brother' attitude of India. The flotilla of boats with food items and Indian transport aircraft escorted by fighter planes sweeping into Lanka's air space and dropping twenty-five tons of food and medicine on and around Jaffna in 1987 were but symbolic signals big brother India was conveying to a relatively insignificant neighbour. Jayawardene was finally forced to come down on his knees and formally seek India's help. This was the Peace Accord of 1987 between Rajiv Gandhi and Junius Jayawardene, which gave India everything it wanted. In other words, the Indian government had effectively used the Tamil militants for its purpose of asserting its regional hegemony, and now they could be dumped! This was the fourth crime.

Consequently, nearly a lakh of Indian troops were sent to battle the Tamil militants, giving a respite to the Sri Lankan army. In military conventions, if the army is to be sent outside the country sufficient advance notice is to be given to it to study the terrain, geography, etc, so that the army can plan the strategies of the battles to be waged. But now the Indian troops were packed off without notice, the heaviest casualties among the Indian troops occurring during the first 10 days of battle, just because the Indian government sent them like sheep to a slaughter house. The final tally was about 2,000 Indian troops and about 8,000 Tamil militants killed and several thousands on both sides injured. With the fall of the Congress government in 1989, the way was paved for the Indian troops to return home, now that India's regional supre-

macy had been established, regardless of whether or not the Tamils in Sri Lanka were able to live their life with dignity and respect. Now Indians are only spectators to what is going on between the better equipped and trained Sri Lankan troops and the LTTE and the Indian media keeps repeating parrot-like what the official Sri Lankan government announces about the continuing war and the casualties. This was the fifth crime.

The reason for the above historical narration is to underscore that if Rajiv Gandhi was brutally assassinated, it was not just out of a personal vendetta of some crazy person, but rather as a result of a process in which Rajiv Gandhi played a crucial role. Any political analyst would admit that Rajiv Gandhi sending Indian troops to Sri Lanka was not only a tactical misadventure but a grave political blunder and a morally wrong act. In other words, Rajiv Gandhi was accountable for the thousands of lives lost on both sides and for having brought the situation back to square one. Apart from the lives lost and property destroyed, Rajiv Gandhi was also responsible for the human rights violations that the IPKF committed against the Tamils in the northern and eastern Sri Lanka. Illegal confinement of persons, unwarranted arrests and torture of not only members of the militant groups but also of the innocent civilians by the IPKF are facts attested to not only by the civic rights groups in Sri Lanka but also by international human rights organisations such as the Amnesty International. Worse still are the serious accusations of rape, including gang rape, of Tamil women during the 'search operations' by the IPKF. These are things that cannot be just wished away as 'unfounded'. Nor can they be mitigated by repeating the same slogan of the 'very high moral standards of the Indian army'. In fairness to the people and sources which have brought out these accusations a probe is needed to be undertaken to ascertain the facts and punish the guilty. This has not been done so far by the Indian government.

To conclude, all the Indians who respect their conscience must denounce the harassment of the nearly 6 lakh Sri Lankan Tamils presently in our country and demand a stop to that. And secondly, the Indian government bears the responsibility to see that justice is done to the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and it cannot wash its hands off just because India has enough problems of its own. And thirdly, the Indian government has a grave obligation to repair the human damage it has done to the Tamil population in Sri Lanka.