

9. Sri Lankan Diaspora Itching for a Greater Tamil Eelam? : Views from the UK and India

Manohari Velamati

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The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora was considered by the former Sri Lankan President J.R.Jayawardane as the “world’s most powerful minority”. Among them, A recent field visit undertaken in London to study the role of Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in the Sri Lankan ethnic crisis, has provided amazing insights into many of the issues concerning diaspora and Sri Lanka and highlighted the importance they attach to India in their search for a just solution to the Tamil question. Notably, Tamil expats of diverse political and ideological affiliation admit that even though India’s role alone may not bring a lasting solution to the ethnic conflict, no effective solution can also be reached without India.

Apparently, the Tamil expats may have diverse views on how to resolve the conflict, but they are united in their distrust of the Sri Lankan government. Interestingly quite, it also emerged during discussion with several Tamil expats that the LTTE, which was under tremendous pressure because of the military victories by the Sri Lankan government at home and the change in international political situation after 9/11, was contemplating a wider movement for a Greater Tamil Eelam including the Tamils of Sri Lanka and southern India, to enlist wider support for its demand for separate Tamil Eelam.

After the anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka in 1983, India became the first destination for most of the Tamils who fled Sri Lanka. However, a considerable number of Sri Lankan Tamils also migrated to the UK. There was a good presence of Sri Lankan Tamil students and professionals from 1960s and 1970s in the UK by then, which also acted as a pulling factor for initial flow of displaced Tamils from Sri Lanka. Many of them even transited through India. The diaspora political organizations were first established in the UK among other Western countries. In fact, almost all the Tamil political and extremist groups operating in Sri Lanka have their representative associations in London. Whenever the political climate changes in Sri Lanka, it is immediately reflected in the inter-organisational relations within diaspora politics in the UK. The capital city, London served as the headquarters for LTTE’s international activities, until it was banned by the UK in 2001.

Demographically, Canada houses the highest number of Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora population. However, the London Tamil diaspora plays the most influential role amongst the Tamil diaspora around the world. As such interaction with a wider cross section of politically active Sri Lankan Tamils in the UK was indeed a rewarding and enriching experience.

Ethnic Conflict: Divergent Perceptions of the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora

One finds different responses from different groups on the central issue of Tamil Eelam. There are some ardent Tamil nationalists, especially in the West, who have not yet given

up hope for Tamil Eelam. There are others who are ready to settle for a federal solution. In contrast, the poor Sri Lankan Tamil refugees living in Tamil Nadu refugee camps, any solution that ensures them livelihood and security seems acceptable. In contrast, the poor Sri Lankan Tamil refugees living in Tamilnadu refugee camps, any solution that ensures them livelihood and security seems acceptable.

However, majority of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora were quite ambivalent over the issue of Eelam. They would criticise the LTTE's methods of spearheading the cause of Eelam through violent killings of other Tamil groups at one level and endorse it when the discussion turned to the assaults by the government forces. The feeling that the government cannot be trusted was the most common and most pervasive amongst the diaspora. For most of them LTTE was the sole alternative or may be the most necessary evil in the existing circumstances.

Those critical of the LTTE would say that the ceasefire agreement signed in 2002 and the resultant peace talks between the LTTE and Sri Lankan government provided the context for dispassionate discussion on the use of violent methods by the LTTE. There was open criticism of the Tigers' methods. In fact, a Tamil dissident political activist in the UK admitted that even some of the LTTE cadres left the movement during this time. The peace process had created the space for moderation in diaspora's approach to the Tamil issue in Sri Lanka.

Ironically, this sense of moderation was not favoured by the LTTE and some of the LTTE dissidents escaped from Sri Lanka to South India. It is interesting to observe that these dissidents reportedly provided military training to the Naxals. Significantly, Karuna's split from the LTTE and the international bans on the Tamil Tigers gave extraordinary strength to these groups to effectively embark on counter political activism advocating federal solution. Many in the UK believed that if the Sri Lankan government could put forward a coherent political solution addressing the core concerns of the Tamils, it could win over a large number of diaspora Tamils. It has to be borne in mind that the diaspora support to the LTTE fluctuates with the change of political situation in Sri Lanka and during the peace talks with the LTTE, the support for LTTE and its methods had declined sharply amongst the Tamil diaspora. Conversely, with the failure of the process, restart of the conflict, increase in human rights violations by the Sri Lankan forces and inability of the government to offer a political solution to the conflict, the support for LTTE increased dramatically amongst the diaspora.

Greater Tamil Eelam: LTTE's Changed Goal?

It was quite amusing to find the LTTE sympathizers in the diaspora toying with the idea of a Greater Tamil Eelam. Was it because of a conscious effort on the part of the LTTE to arouse pan-Tamil sentiments in the wake of its military reverses since 2006, so that they would generate nationalist sympathies amongst their co-ethnics in Indian province of Tamilnadu? Or was there a deep-seated nationalist urge in their psyche at the sub-conscious level that drove them towards this alternative?

One gathered that this view was promoted basically by the LTTE sympathizers to appeal to the Tamil nationalist sentiments in southern India. There is a view amongst this constituency that if India is not sympathetic towards their position then by mooted the idea of a greater Eelam comprising Tamil majority areas of southern India and northern Sri Lanka, they would put India on the defensive.

Simultaneously, there is an exiled consciousness at work which through its search for the roots tends to romanticize a golden era in the past when Tamils of southern India had relative independence and considerable influence through their cultural and economic prowess. In fact, one finds an unmistakable sense of nostalgia about Chennai and southern India haunting the diaspora, irrespective of their sympathies or antipathies towards LTTE. Most of the Sri Lankan Tamil community looks upon Chennai as their cultural capital. Their increasing cultural linkages with Indian Tamils- a 'conscious effort' by the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, in particular for the UK Tamils has strengthened this extra-territorial pan-Tamil feeling among them.

This has, indeed, contributed to the consolidation of their Tamil identity and political consciousness in such a way that the Indian state of Tamilnadu has become part their being. This is perhaps propelling the idea of an independent Greater Tamil Eelam. The issue of resolution of the ethnic conflict is thus secondary for such nationalists. In their view, it is more important for all the scattered Tamils around the globe to have a nation. If one were to analyse the way LTTE is constructing its ethnic nationalism, one would find that LTTE's nationalism now embraces not just the elements of anti-Sinhala majoritarianism, but it also includes myths, values and cultural traditions that can be broadly used to justify a call for Greater Tamil Eelam. Some of the LTTE sympathizers would argue therefore that increased cultural linkages between the Sri Lankan Tamils and Tamils in India would soon precipitate a belligerent nationalism which will appeal to the Tamils of southern India and result in a movement for a Greater Tamil Nation.

Political Pulse in Tamil Nadu

In clear contrast, there is hardly any taker for Greater Eelam in Tamil Nadu, even though most of the Tamils are sympathetic towards the Tamils of Sri Lanka and critical of the Sri Lankan government. They would rather view the call for Pan Tamil nationalism as a ploy by Tamil Tigers to shore up their image as ultimate champions of Tamil Nationalism, basically, to compensate for their declining military strength. In Tamil Nadu, evidently, there are few political supporters for the LTTE's call for Tamil Eelam in the north and east of Sri Lanka. The political support for LTTE's Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka is, in fact, limited to few leaders like V. Gopalswamy or Vaiko, General Secretary of the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Khazagam (MDMK), Nedumaran of the Tamil Nationalist Movement (TNM) and S. Ramadoss of the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK). However, the LTTE's idea of a Greater Tamil Eelam may not enthuse these leaders. Apart from that, there is no popular support for this view in Tamilnadu. Many of the Tamil leaders may be serving as 'mouth pieces', to convey Sri Lankan Tamil concerns to the central government, but they would not like to stoke nationalist Tamil sentiments for political purposes, and commit political suicide. Moreover, the major parties in the state,

the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) are sympathetic to Sri Lankan Tamils' cause and they have reached out to Sri Lanka Tamil refugees time and again on humanitarian grounds even without checking their refugee status when they arrive on the Tamil Nadu sea shore. In certain cases even they have tried to advocate the cause of fishermen from Tamilnadu and projected the case of assaults by the Sri Lankan navy as proof of their anti Tamil bias. However, these leaders do not support Tamil Tigers' methods and their aggressive portrayal of Tamil nationalism.

The LTTE has nevertheless sought to appeal to the Tamil sentiments in number of ways. It has tried to take advantage of the fact that the Tamilnadu government was bitterly critical of Sri Lankan navy's assault on fishermen from Tamilnadu. In fact, the AIADMK leader Jayalalitha's writ petition against the agreements of 1974 and 1976 India-Sri Lanka maritime agreements, which ceded Kacchativu Island to Sri Lanka, directly accused the Sri Lankan Navy of killing the Tamil Nadu fishermen in its waters. LTTE took this opportunity to call Sri Lankan government an enemy of all Tamils in the sub-continent. An active member of a pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora organization in London argues that although over 300 Tamil Nadu fishermen have got killed over the last six years by the Sri Lankan Navy, the Indian government gives them no protection, because India considers Tamils as second class citizens. Such arguments are advanced to convince the Indian Tamil fraternity that only an independent Tamil nation can resolve all their grievances.

Views of the Diaspora in the UK on India

The Lankan Tamil diaspora would urge India to intervene in the island nation's long standing crisis, which they would consider as their mother country. Even the Tamil Tiger sympathizers among the diaspora feel that India, instead of being hard on the issue after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, should be flexible to find a solution to the Tamil question. They say that India can only call itself a regional super power if it can intervene and assure protection of the rights of ethnic communities in the region. But their perception was that India was often biased in its approach and was worried about its national interests.

Many of them would argue that India's foreign policy towards Sri Lanka has been based on its narrow national interests and India has never shown any genuine concern for the Tamils of Sri Lanka. For many among the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, the name of Research & Analysis Wing (RAW) leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Interestingly, the Tamil Information Centre (TIC) in the UK has its own grievances against India: it accuses Indian agencies of confiscating all its precious documents and manuscripts when they had their branches in Chennai and Madurai in the 1980s. They would allege that India had not returned the materials after promising to do so while forcing them to close their Indian offices after the 1987 accord.

By and large, the Lankan Tamil diaspora is of the view that India is an active supporter of the ongoing military operations by the Lankan government. They would grieve that India

was joining hands with the Sinhala rulers and trying to end the conflict by wiping off the Tamil Tigers. They would argue that the LTTE was only 'part of the problem' and not 'the problem'. They would also say that India should not support Rajapakse's war efforts when Rajapakse did not have any alternative political solution to the crisis. This was most evident, they would say, when he terminated the APRC process, especially when the recommendations were almost finalized for a devolution.

Most of the Tamil diaspora feel that it is difficult for India alone to play a role in resolving the Tamil issue given the changed environment both locally and internationally. Nevertheless, they would want India to take an initiative to bring about a ceasefire in Sri Lanka. In fact, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora would urge India to take up at least the case of human rights violations and urgent needs of IDPs with the Sri Lankan government on a priority basis and then try to bring both the parties to the negotiating table and bring in UN to help these parties to arrive at a political solution. They would admit nonetheless that this needed support of the international community including that of US and the EU.

Support for LTTE to go on?

The Tamil diaspora, which has been providing funds and critical assistance for propaganda especially in the West, is working full time to support the militant movement at home. But they admit that this international support infrastructure of the LTTE may evaporate with a change in the Sinhalese attitude towards the Tamils. If only they would provide a coherent political package that protects the minorities' cultural rights, the militant movement would die on its own, they believe.

This is not to deny that a defiant and belligerent spirit is still in play amongst some of the LTTE sympathizers in the diaspora. As an LTTE sympathizer in the UK would comment: "For all the sins Sri Lanka and India have committed, they will one day see Sri Lanka ruled by the Tamils." There is a fond hope underlying this assertion that one day there will be a Greater Tamil Eelam lording over Sri Lanka in southern Indian region. There is also an implicit warning to both India and Sri Lanka that the wider question of Tamil nationalism will not die its natural death with the defeat of LTTE. Their dream of a greater Tamil Eelam may come back to haunt both the countries in the coming days.

(Manohari Velamati, Doctoral Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.)