

Tamil silence and Tiruchelvam's killing. (1999, September 19). *The Sunday times.*

Tamil silence and Tiruchelvam's killing

It is over one month since Dr. Neelakandan Tiruchelvam's demise at the hands of an assassin.

I wish to place on record the feelings of a preponderant section of the Tamils on the death of Dr. Tiruchelvam's death.

Eulogies have come in from abroad and locally. From foreigners and from Sinhales. Indeed, at this time, it is the done thing to say all the good things about a dead person. There has been hardly a good word for him from some of the Tamils, whether from abroad or locally.

Why this glaring dichotomy?

The Tamils have been condemned by the international and local media for being ungrateful and callous indeed, showing supreme indifference at Tiruchelvam's death. "Silence is the most perfect expression of scorn," said George Bernard Shaw. It should not be so, yet it is so, told, because he was a "Tamil politician", a "Tamil parliamentarian", a "Tamil moderate", a "fighter for minority rights", a "human rights activist", a "committed crusader for peace", an "international figure" and a horde of other things that he is supposed to have stood for. There were no Tamil banners, no Tamil leaflets as is customary, no mass Tamil participation at his funeral barring the well-known Tamil supporters of Sri Lankan Governments and the Establishment, no Tamil speakers at the cremation barring the Secretary-General of his Party, and no eulogies from Tamils. Indeed, one would have thought he was not a Tamil, after all. All this, a strong indictment indeed!

Tiruchelvam had an unnatural death. But he is only one such Tamil. There have been thousands of Tamils in the recent past having had a similar fate at the hands of successive Sri Lankan Governments.

They were also precious lives. Precious Tamil lives, no different from that of Tiruchelvam. But nobody would stop to think about them. Why? Is it because they were not friends of the Sinhalese? Is it because they were of no use to the Establishment?

He was asked to contest the Colombo District on an independent Tamil list in 1994 but he refused and assumed the role of a king-maker by searching for Tamils to get onto the People's Alliance (PA) list.

As a Tamil, Tiruchelvam was probably an enemy unto himself.

As a "Tamil politician", Tiruchelvam did not know what his constituency was. Was Tamils or was it really the Sinhalese?

As a Tamil, he could not have been blinded to the Tamil aspirations at this moment because the party to which he belonged, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) signatory to the Thimpu Principles of August 1985 which laid down the four principles extolling Tamil aspirations. In the process of fashioning some convoluted "Peace Pacts" that saw three drafts in as many years (1995, 1996 and 1997) Tiruchelvam saw to it that aspirations of the Tamils were completely ignored in all three drafts. And this, so close to Thimpu.

Tiruchelvam was more an Establishment man. An Establishment man of successive Lankan governments. He was a great friend of the Official Languages Commission and would be a principal speaker at all its functions and indeed had a close associate of one of the Commissioners. But this Tamil Commissioner would eternally complain of the impotence of the Commission. Tiruchelvam did not help in the full and proper implementation of the Tamil Language in spite of his well-known proximity to the Sri Lankan Establishment.

Tiruchelvam revelled in being an engine-room boy. He loved that role. It was this closeness that prevented him from facing the hustings and his Tamil peers. Still, it got him into Parliament twice, but only as a nominated member on each occasion. The only time he faced the Tamils was when the "friendly" Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) was in Tamil Eelam in 1989. But even his "international connections" could not help him in when he faced his own kind.

As a "Tamil Parliamentarian", Tiruchelvam went into Parliament, first, in 1982 when he was nominated to the Vaddukottai seat - the constituency which staged the Pannakam Convention way back in 1976 where the momentous resolution for the separate state of Tamil Eelam was passed. During that stint in Parliament, Tiruchelvam did not make a speech about the Tamils even so soon after the Pannakam Convention.

From the word go in August 1994, the TULF would nominally speak on the debate on the extension of the Emergency and slither away during voting time. Tiruchelvam would not even speak at such debates, lest it hurt the Establishment.

From the time this particular Sri Lankan Government took office, Tiruchelvam's party, the TULF, on the basis of dubious logic, would oppose the votes of the Ministry of Defence and would vote with the Government for the Budget. This, the TULF thought, was how the Tamils viewed this as intellectual dishonesty of a very base order because this Government's reign has been the bloodiest in the history of this island, as far as the Tamils are concerned. Tiruchelvam, in spite of his intellectual attainments, did not try to extricate himself from this situation, even if he could not change the course of his party.

In the five years since 1994 Tiruchelvam has been a parliamentarian, he has spoken on various matters ranging from sex to Satan. But he could not have spoken even five times about the pathetic and tragic plight of the Tamils under this Sri Lankan Government. Thousands of Tamil civilians have been killed, tens of thousands of Tamil villages shelled, hundreds

Tamil homes and acres of Tamil agricultural lands have been destroyed, many places of worship and schools bombed, food and medicine denied to Tamil refugees, torture used as weapons of war against the Tamils, Tamils used as human mine detectors and forced labour by an alien Sinhala army, disappearances of Tamils in their hundreds, mass Tamil graves coming to light only now, merciless murders of caged and, there are helpless Tamil political prisoners. Indeed, the genocide of the Tamils! There wasn't a whimper from Tiruchelvam. The Tamils have not forgotten this.

The use of Tamil as an administrative language in the District of Colombo could have been done if the President makes a proclamation in terms of the 16th Amendment and that proclamation is gazetted. Only if this is done would all the records be kept in Tamil and Tamil be used as a language of courts. Repeated requests were made to the President. In spite of Tiruchelvam's position with the President, he did nothing to have this done.

Tiruchelvam has been described as a "Tamil moderate". Was he really? It is legion, certainly amongst the Tamils, that it was his party, the TULF that goaded the Tamil youth to take to arms with the inflammatory speeches they made from all their platforms so that the youth slit their wrists, drew blood and dramatically placed "pottu" of blood on the foreheads of TULF leaders during the 1977 hustings. The Tamil youth took to arms in a big way, as a result. All the Tamils who carry guns today and who are snugly ensconced in the lap of the Sri Lankan Government which is making use of them, will not deny that Tiruchelvam was a true moderate and if he was in the TULF then, why did he not disassociate himself with the TULF line? If he was not in the TULF then, why did he stay thereafter? As if this is not enough, the TULF manifesto for the 1977 General Election said that the Constitution of Tamil Eelam would be "brought into operation either by peaceful means or by direct action or struggle". What does this sentence denote, if it does not refer to an armed struggle? The TULF has not unequivocally jettisoned this star of theirs. Tiruchelvam is, therefore, part and parcel of this philosophy. To pay lip service otherwise to "peace", whilst running with the hare and hunting with the hound, is hypocritical.

Tiruchelvam is held out to be a "human rights activist". It is the position of the Tamils that never before have they been at the receiving end of so many human rights violations, much brutal and barbaric violence as has been experienced by them since August 1976. During the bloodiest period of this god-forsaken country's history, was there one word of protest, loud and clear, from Tiruchelvam in the name of the Tamils? The Tamils have not forgotten this.

Tiruchelvam took his oaths under the Sixth Amendment which the International Commission of Jurists (another of those international agencies which sent an eulogy at Tiruchelvam's demise) condemned as undemocratic and in violation of Article 25 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. The Tamils have not forgotten this.

Did Tiruchelvam ever have Tamil interests at heart or was he even sensitive to Tamil sentiments? An answer to this could be had from the various eulogies and encomiums that have been paid to him. Very, very significantly, not one of them had anything to say about Tiruchelvam's contribution to the Tamils! And even more significantly even the President of his Party, M. Sivasithamparam, has singularly assumed a position of stony silence. Equally significantly, the Tiruchelvam Pothu Pani Manram has chosen to distance itself from Tiruchelvam at this moment.

In December 1995 when the SL Army re-took Jaffna by setting foot on a deserted beach, the insensitive Government wanted a song and dance to appease the baser Sinhalese sentiments. Poor Tiruchelvam was equally insensitive in suggesting that the Nandhi should be hoisted at the "victory ceremony" of the Sinhalese in order to satisfy the Sinhalese. This was done. Was this necessary? The Tamil Nation, which was reeling at that time, did not forget this.

Tiruchelvam is described as an "international figure". Of particular interest to Tamils is the fact that he was Chairman of the Minority Rights Group International. This organization did a study of Sri Lanka after the present Government came into power and brought out a report in February 1996 with special reference to the Tamils. It was an indictment against his friend - the Sri Lankan Government. The Report had many recommendations. Some Tamil organizations had written to Tiruchelvam during his stewardship requesting him to use his good offices with the Government to which he was so close (as has been now made out by representatives of this Government) and alleviate the distress of the Tamils. He just would not move in the matter.

To make matters worse, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar who, incidentally, suddenly catapulted into the political arena from nowhere, completely let down his friends by calling a press conference on 2.8.99 and announcing, with pompous finality, that Tiruchelvam was a virtual consultant to the Foreign Ministry.

Friends of Tiruchelvam have said that the Tamils have kept their distance from Tiruchelvam because of a "debilitating fear" of the LTTE.

I do not think the LTTE would ever think of videoing those who attended the Tiruchelvam funeral in order to take it out of those Tamils.

Rather than psycho-analyze the Tamils, let us come to grips with reality. Tiruchelvam's funeral took place in Colombo. The Sinhalese bandwagon in the name of NMAT are saying that "400,000 Tamils have colonized Colombo because they could not stand LT harassment". If that argument is correct, why were those Tamils not present at Tiruchelvam's funeral? Indeed, where were the so-called Colombo Tamils who are even to know of the LTTE? Or did Tiruchelvam's funeral show the Sinhalese and the international community about the silent revolution that is under way? And was the realization of this mass support for the silent revolution that led the Sinhala and international sector to work overtime to obtain eulogies about the "brutal", "despicable", "senseless", "dastardly", "cowardly", "callous", "heartless", "monstrous" act that killed Tiruchelvam?

Make no mistake. Any death that is not natural or accidental must, indeed, be described in those superlative terms. But who started it all? Who made this the culture of this island? Who made this a way of life in this country? It must not be forgotten that when the murderers in the Duraiappah murder case were released, the late M. Tiruchelvam hosted a reception for them as the Vice-President of the TULF. Let the Tiruchelvam murder lead to some soul-searching, at least, not only in the Sinhala quarter but also in the TULF corner.

What I have written is not a justification for the murder of Tiruchelvam. Rather, it is to place before the world the other side of the story, if it could be such, for the stagger

unconcern and stunning indifference on the part of the Tamils all over the world regarding this incident. There is really no point in blaming the Tamils en masse for their "indifference" because they have their reasons, and valid ones too. I am only seeking to place those reasons publicly.

What I have written might be described as not being appropriate at this time. But the other side of the story had to be written and written soon. The international sector has had theirs about Tiruchelvar. The Sinhalese have had theirs. At least Tamils, like me must now have our say and bring out their perspective. It is my position that a Tamil must first say, whatever that is not popular, sitting fairly and squarely in Colombo. That is why I have written my point of view about Tiruchelvar.

-G.G. Ponnambalam