


on the

TAMIL

NATIONAL

QUESTION


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**This political document is dedicated to the Revolutionary
Tamil Youth who are committed to the cause of liberating
the oppressed Tamil nation of Eelam.**

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PART TWO:

Right of Nations to Self-Determination and the Tamil National Question.

Lenin our theoretical guide

The first part of this paper briefly documents the specific historical conjunctures and their determinant effects in generating the demand for secession. The principal determinant factor that propelled the dynamics of national friction leading to this inevitable choice of political independence was none other than national oppression. Therefore, in the study of the Tamil National Question, oppression, that is, the oppression of a big nation against a small nation perpetrated within the power structure of a unitary state totality becomes the crucial element for a theoretical analysis as well as for a political strategy.

Positing the problem within the theoretical discourse of Marxism, we hold that Lenin's theoretical elucidations and political strategies offer an adequate basis for a precise formulation of this question. Lenin's exposition of the concept of self-determination, that deals primarily with a nation's right to secession and statehood is adopted here as a theoretical guide to provide a concrete presentation of the Tamil National Question and its political implications.

Our reliance on Lenin's formulations is determined by the fact that neither Marx or Engels nor any other theoretician offers a systematic theory with a concrete political strategy for proletarian praxis in relation to the national question. Indisputably Lenin's works still stand as a theoretical and political paradigm on this domain engaging the problem in manifold aspects. Situating the question within the theoretical framework of historical materialism, providing a historico-economic analysis, Lenin advances a correct proletarian perspective on the national question inter-relating the national struggle with proletarian class struggle. His analysis exposes the limitations and bankruptcy of bourgeois democracy and the dangers of extreme bourgeois nationalism. Lenin firmly held that the non-recognition or rejection of the problems of national minorities will deeply affect the working-class movement and obstruct the proletarian struggle for socialist revolution.

While taking Lenin's discourse as our guide, we are not blind to the fact that every national struggle must be situated within the context of its own concrete historical conditions. The liberation struggle of the Tamil nation demanding political independence, the historical conjunctures of which we have already outlined, arose primarily from the contradictions of national oppression and therefore must be confined to the theoretical specifications and political implications of that nation's right to secession. Within this context many questions are posed. Whether the oppressed Tamil nation has the right to secede; whether the right of that nation to self-determination contravenes the socialist principle of proletarian internationalism; under what political and economic conditions of oppression will a nation opt for secession; whether such a decision to secede and the struggle for political independence will serve the interests of the class struggle of both the oppressed and the oppressor nations; whether the struggle for political independence has the revolutionary potentiality to promote proletarian revolution and socialist transformation of the oppressed Tamil social formation; what is the role and strategy to be adopted by the proletarian revolutionaries of the oppressed nation whose national movement is headed by the bourgeoisie; what kind of political strategy can best serve the class interests of the proletariat of the oppressed as well as the oppressor nations, a strategy which has to be adopted by the Marxist revolutionaries of the oppressor nation who are caught between a progressive struggle of an oppressed nation and a reactionary bourgeois nationalism of the oppressor nation.

These problems are raised and hotly debated within the context of the Tamil National Question. These debates and arguments, enmeshed with vague generalisations and loose conceptualisations, have created so much confusion and controversy that a clarity and a correct perspective on this issue has become absolutely essential. Some of the Marxist political movements in Sri Lanka (I am not including here the disintegrated old left, who, in the 60's abandoned their radical stand on the Tamil question to fall a prey to Sinhala bourgeois chauvinism) are caught up in this theoretical muddle. Calling themselves as Leninists, yet embedded in the nationalism of the oppressor nation, these vulgar Marxists advance a theory of proletarian internationalism as if it is dialectically opposed to the right of a nation to self-determination; a crude theoretical blindness similar to the position of Rosa Luxemburg whose vague notions on the national question were bitterly criticised and rejected by Lenin. To reinforce their theoretical arguments these pseudo-Marxists are making 'quilt' quotations from Lenin's texts; that is, sentences are picked from various contexts on the theme of proletarian internationalism to distort and denounce a progressive struggle of an oppressed nation. One of the aims of our theoretical endeavour is to challenge these positions, expose the political opportunism behind this vulgarised Marxism, and to advance a correct proletarian perspective on the Tamil National Question.

Self-determination and secession.

The Tamil nation is a historically constituted social formation possessing all the basic elements that are usually assembled to define a concrete characterisation of a nation. Even the crudest Stalinist definition can be advanced in our case. Yet a definition as to what

constitutes a nation is theoretically unnecessary since we can precisely formulate our issue within the Leninist conceptual framework of the self-determination of nations.

The concept self-determination needs a precise and a clear definition. Such a clarification is vital to our national question, since some of the so-called Marxist-Leninists in Sri Lanka are confused on this basic concept. The most ridiculous misrepresentation and misconceptualisation of this concept arise from a position in which the right of the Tamil nation to self-determination is given recognition while opposing secession. Attempting to show a radical face as revolutionaries these political opportunists are proclaiming that the Tamil speaking people as an oppressed nation has the right to self-determination but they do not have the right to secession. It is precisely on this position one finds a calculated distortion of a clearly defined concept. Lenin's texts on the national question constantly reiterate the definition that the self-determination of nations is nothing but secession and the formation of an independent state. To quote a couple of examples :

"Consequently, if we want to grasp the meaning of self-determination of nations, not by juggling with legal definitions, or 'inventing' abstract definitions, but by examining the historico-economic conditions of the national movements, we must inevitably reach the conclusion that the self-determination of nations means the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies and the formation of an independent national state".

(Lenin: 'The Right of Nations to Self-determination').

Again in the same theoretical essay Lenin writes :

"Self-determination of nations in the Marxist programme cannot, from a historico-economic point of view, have any other meaning than political self-determination, state independence, and the formation of a national state".

Thus, Lenin offers a precise definition. The right of nations to self-determination in his formulation means the right of an oppressed nation to secede from the oppressor nation and form an independent national state. Therefore, those who pretend to recognise the right of the oppressed Tamil nation to self-determination and argue such a right does not embody the freedom to secede, are neither Marxists or Leninists but chauvinists parading under socialist slogans. To characterise these pseudo-socialists in Lenin's own words :

"A socialist in any of the oppressor nations who does not recognise and does not struggle for the right of the oppressed nations to self-determination (i.e. for the right to secession) is in reality a chauvinist, not a socialist".

The freedom of an oppressed nation to secede, in Lenin's theoretical analysis, is advanced, on one level, as a universal socialist principle

of workers democracy, a corner stone of what Lenin calls 'consistent democracy'. On a different level, the struggle of an oppressed nation to secession is seen as a revolutionary ground for mass action, a ground for a proletarian onslaught on the bourgeoisie. Therefore, the political genius of Lenin situates this struggle of the oppressed nations within the realms of socialist democracy and proletarian revolution. It is precisely within these two spheres we wish to situate the Tamil National Question to elucidate the progressive and revolutionary character of this independence struggle.

Inalienable Right of a Nation

In championing the right of secession and articulating the principle of self-determination in the national democratic programme, Lenin sparked off a violent theoretical controversy among his co-revolutionaries. Whether such a right will lead to disintegration and fragmentation of smaller states, whether the freedom to secede contradicts the Marxian principle of proletarian internationalism, were questions raised against his thesis on the national question. These questions and Lenin's consistent defence of this position are important to us because it is precisely these questions that are hurled against the Tamil demand for secession.

The freedom of secession should not be confused with the reactionary bourgeois category of 'separatism' which is sometimes utilised to undermine the genuine democratic struggle of the oppressed Tamil nation. The freedom of secession articulated within the concept of self-determination exclusively implies an inalienable right of a nation of people to agitate for political independence from the oppressor nation. This complete freedom to agitate for secession is a right, which can be exercised under conditions of intolerable oppression. Therefore the recognition of this right of secession, Lenin repeatedly argued, is vital to prevent national friction arising out of a big nation's chauvinism, a right that upholds the complete equality of nations, a right, if violated, will lead to national hostility and the fragmentation of nations. It is here, Lenin advances the dialectical principle that, in order to ensure unity there must be freedom to separate. He even argued that freedom to divorce will not cause the disintegration of the family. Therefore, Lenin rigorously held, that he was not advocating a doctrine of separatism but advancing a highest principle of socialist democracy in which absolute freedom should be accorded to a nation of people to secede under conditions of oppression. To quote him in this context:

"Specifically, this demand for political democracy implies complete freedom to agitate for secession....This demand, therefore, is not the equivalent of a demand for separation, fragmentation and the formation of small states. It implies only a consistent expression of struggle against all national oppression".

(Lenin: 'The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-determination').

Proletarian Internationalism

Marxist political praxis certainly advances proletarian internationalism, but at the same time, gives fullest recognition to the revolutionary character and the historical legitimacy of the national movements. The principle of nationality, or rather, the phenomenon of nationalism itself, in Marxist discourse is characterised as an historically inevitable political phenomenon in bourgeois society. For Marx, nationalism is historically prior to proletarian internationalism. Proletarian revolutions in the advanced capitalist social formations, Marx foresaw, will generate the progressive forces of internationalism towards the gradual structuration and consolidation of a world socialist society. Lenin, who saw the historical unfolding of the great socialist revolution, became an ardent champion of proletarian internationalism, since he rightly believed that only the revolutionary power of a united international proletariat can challenge and win the structure of dominance of world capitalism. Therefore, we find in Lenin's texts a constant emphasis on the necessity of the solidarity of the working classes of all nations to mobilise to fight against the hegemony of international capital. Yet, on the other hand, we find Lenin as a fierce champion of the oppressed; he fought vigorously against all forms of oppression. He correctly perceived that national oppression is the enemy of the class struggle and without the emancipation of the oppressed, proletarian solidarity of the oppressed and the oppressor nations is unattainable. That is why, Lenin firmly held that proletarian internationalism demands that the proletariat of the oppressor nation should grant the right of self-determination (i.e. the right to secession) to the oppressed nation.

"The proletariat must struggle against the enforced retention of oppressed nations within the bounds of the given state, which means that they must fight for the right to self-determination. The proletariat must demand freedom of political separation for the colonies and nations oppressed by 'their own' nation. Otherwise, the internationalism of the proletariat would be nothing but empty words, neither confidence nor class solidarity would be possible between the workers of the oppressed and the oppressor nations....."

(Lenin: 'The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-determination').

Some political opportunists, who are prostituting Marxism and Leninism in Sri Lanka, proclaim that they are upholding the principle of proletarian internationalism and therefore, they are opposed to the Tamil demand for secession. Ignorant of the proletarian political strategy advanced by Lenin on the national question, ignoring the progressive struggle of the oppressed nation, they are calling upon the working classes of the oppressed and the oppressor nations to unite under the slogan of proletarian internationalism. This phoney internationalism that attempts to undermine and supersede the progressive nationalism of the oppressed nation, is what Marx rightly characterised, as 'bourgeois nationalist internationalism'. Lenin exposes the 'unpardonable opportunism' of the so-called socialists of the oppressor

nations who raise the slogans of internationalism without recognising the right of secession of the oppressed nations. Lenin even stressed the necessity of compensation on the part of the communists of the oppressor nations, to alleviate the fear and suspicion of the oppressed nations.

"This is why internationalism on the part of oppressor or 'great' nations, as they are called (though they are great only in their violence, only great as bullies), must consist not only in the observance of the formal equality of nations but even in an inequality of the oppressor nation, the great nation, that must make up for the inequality which obtains in actual practice. Anybody who does not understand this has not grasped the real proletarian attitude to the national question, is still essentially petty bourgeois in his point of view and is, therefore, sure to descend to the bourgeois point of view".

(Lenin: "The Question of Nationalities or Autonomisation").

The right of nations to self-determination does not contravene the socialist principle of proletarian internationalism. On the contrary, as Lenin has shown, the recognition of this right is a fundamental necessity to advance internationalism. It will amount to chauvinism and political opportunism to preach the noble ideals of internationalism to a nation of people caught up in a liberation struggle against the oppression of the bigger dominant nation.

Intolerable Oppression and Inevitable Secession

We are now approaching the most crucial stage of our debate on the Tamil National Question. That is, under what political and economic conditions of oppression a nation will opt for secession, and whether such a decision to secede and the struggle for national independence will serve the interests of the class struggle of both the oppressed and oppressor nations. An elucidation of these issues is vital for a theoretical comprehension and for a political strategy for proletarian revolutionaries in Sri Lanka who are confronted with a national struggle of an oppressed nation which has chosen the path of secession.

The determinant factors behind the Tamil's decision to secede and form a state of their own, as we have pointed out earlier, are the historical conditions of intolerable national oppression. The cumulative effects of this multi-dimensional oppression made joint existence unbearable. The contradictions that emanated from national friction made a political rupture inevitable. Thrown into the painful dilemma of political isolation and economic deprivation and threatened with an annihilation of their ethnic identity, the Tamil speaking people of Eelam, had no other alternative but to opt for a secession. Under intensified conditions of national oppression, a decision to secede and fight for political independence, is not only a correct action but also a revolutionary move which will advance the class struggle of the oppressed nation.

Lenin says :

"From their daily experience the masses know perfectly well

the value of geographical and economic ties and the advantages of a big market and big state. They will therefore, resort to secession only when national oppression and national friction make joint life absolutely intolerable and hinder any and all economic intercourse. In that case, the interests of capitalist development and of the freedom of the class struggle will be best served by secession".

(Lenin: The Right of Nations to Self-determination).

Within this Leninist perspective we can safely hold that the decision of the oppressed Tamil nation to secede from the oppressor nation was necessary and historically inevitable because of the extreme conditions of oppression, the nature and form of which we have outlined in the first part of this document. The question that can be posed now is, whether the Tamil struggle for political independence will serve the interests of the class struggle of both the oppressed and oppressor nations.

The Role of the Revolutionary Marxists

Thirty years of national oppression unleashed by the Sinhala nation has awakened the Tamil masses of Eelam from feudal slumber and polarised them under a national movement to struggle for national emancipation. Caught up in the historical tendency of the developing capitalism, drawn into a struggle to fight for their political liberty, various strata of classes, castes and peasantry converged into this mass movement under the leadership of the Tamil bourgeoisie. In a unique historical conjuncture in which there is an absence of highly matured class antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, in a revolutionary situation where the masses are in upsurge against oppression, in a progressive national movement where the bourgeoisie of the oppressed lead the struggle, the role of the proletarian revolutionaries of both the oppressed and the oppressor nations become problematic. It is precisely in this situation that the Marxists have to adopt the Leninist political strategy.

Lenin tells us that it is the bounden duty of every Marxist to support the struggle of the oppressed nation and recognise its right to self-determination, i.e. the right to secession. Insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed lead the struggle and fight the oppressor, the proletariat can only give conditional support to the bourgeoisie 'to create best conditions for the class struggle'.

Yet Lenin warns us about the class interests of the bourgeoisie in a national democratic struggle. First of all, the bourgeoisie will attempt to advance a bourgeois nationalism which is reactionary and chauvinistic in character though it may 'contain democratic contents that is directed against oppression'. Secondly, in order to protect its privileges and class interests, the bourgeoisie will certainly attempt to collaborate with the bourgeoisie of the oppressor nation to the detriment of the revolutionary cause, and to deceive the working class. To quote Lenin in this context :

"The bourgeoisie of the oppressed nations persistently utilise the slogans of national liberation to deceive the workers; in

their internal policy they use these slogans for reactionary agreements with the bourgeoisie of the dominant nation...."

(Lenin: "The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-determination").

In this context the task of the proletarian revolutionary is to expose and frustrate any collaborations between the bourgeoisie of the oppressed and oppressor nations which will cause irreparable damage to the revolutionary and progressive aspirations of an oppressed nation seeking national liberation. The need for such collaboration arises since the bourgeois class is structurally weak to carry out a national revolutionary struggle. This is evident in the Tamil national struggle, where one finds a historical record of attempts at collaborations between the Tamil and Sinhala bourgeoisie.

Since the Tamil bourgeoisie is structurally weak as a class to advance the revolutionary task of national liberation, the strategy to be adopted by the revolutionary Marxists of the oppressed nation is to ensure the development of the proletariat and strengthen that class with the alliance of the peasantry and the petty-bourgeoisie to create a revolutionary proletarian leadership with a strong social base among the urban and rural working masses. Such a revolutionary leadership, which will assume itself into an authentic national liberation movement, will have the potential to unite all the progressive and revolutionary forces to carry out the task of national liberation.

The scope of this document does not permit a detailed analysis of the revolutionary strategies and a political programme of action to be adopted by the revolutionaries of Eelam nation. It is suffice to say that the task is two fold - national emancipation and socialist construction of society. The Tamil national liberation struggle must advance both these tasks inter-relatedly, to organise to fight the oppressor state apparatus while generating a revolutionary process to overthrow the obsolete social order in the construction of a new socialist social formation. This revolutionary strategy must be situated and worked out in relation to the historical concrete conditions in which we are embedded. There is no need to bind our liberation struggle to one particular form. Marxism does not prescribe one form of struggle. The science of revolution and the revolutionary experiments in the world offer us new modes of revolutionary strategies. As Lenin rightly observed :

"Under no circumstances does Marxism confine itself to the forms of struggle possible and in existence at the given moment only, recognising as it does that new forms of struggle, unknown to the participants of the given period, inevitably arise as the given social situation changes".

(Coll. Works Vol. II. Page 213)

The Role of the Progressives of the Oppressor Nation

Marx, who supported the Irish National Movement, called upon the English working classes to fight for the liberation of Ireland, which he considered as an oppressed colony under England. He firmly held

that the liberation of Ireland was a necessity and an essential condition for the emancipation of the English working classes. He asserted that no nation can be free while it practises oppression against another country.

The writings of Marx and Lenin on the national question announces a very important political truth, that the national oppression would inevitably hold back and divide the working classes of the oppressor nation. It is through oppression and through the hegemony of a national chauvinistic ideology that the ruling bourgeoisie exerts its dominance and power over the working masses of the oppressor nation. Marx wrote :

"It is (Britain's oppression of Ireland) the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite their organisation. It is the secret of which the capitalist class maintains its power".

(Marx's letter to Meyer and Vogt, April 9th, 1870)

Lenin took Marx as his guide on the national question when he wrote :

"Our model will always be Marx, who, after living in Britain for decades and becoming half-English, demanded freedom and national independence for Ireland in the interests of the socialist movement of the British workers".

(Lenin: 'On the National Pride of the Great Russians')

We advocate that the progressives and revolutionaries of the oppressor nation (in this case, the Sinhala nation) who uphold the proletarian praxis of Marxism and Leninism should follow the strategy advanced by these great revolutionary teachers and give an unconditional, unrelented support to the freedom struggle of the oppressed Tamil nation. Such a political strategy can only serve the interests of the class struggle of both the oppressed and the oppressor nations, since the ruling Sinhala bourgeoisie has been reinforcing a chauvinistic ideological hegemony and has been actually practising a vicious form of national oppression with the motive of dividing and weakening the working class movement in Sri Lanka. To break this bourgeois ideological hegemony and to unite the proletariat of the oppressor nation, the revolutionary Marxists in the South should advance an ideological counter-hegemony supporting most resolutely the right of the oppressed Tamil nation to secession. Such a strategy requires a profound political education of the masses on the democratic rights of the oppressed nation. As Lenin said, 'the masses must be systematically educated to champion - most resolutely, consistently, boldly and in a revolutionary manner' - the right of nations to self-determination. Such an ideological struggle on the part of the Sinhala progressives is essential to raise the level of political consciousness of the Sinhala proletariat to understand and accept the legitimacy of the Tamil cause.

Proletarian revolutionaries committed to the task of socialist revolution should seek and understand the revolutionary potential of mass movements. The national liberation struggle of the oppressed Eelam nation has such revolutionary potential, the failure on the part of the Sinhalese

சுயநிர்ணய
உரிமையும்
தனிநாட்டுக்
கோரிக்கையும்

ஏ. எஸ். பாலசிங்கம் எழுதியது

நம்முடைய மக்களின் தேசிய விடுதலைப்
போராட்டத்தை விஞ்ஞான சோஷலிஸ
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