

Questioning the War

THEY ARE UNDER SIEGE—THE TAMILS OF SRI LANKA. THAT INDIA would vote in favour of UN resolution censuring Sri Lanka for its alleged war crimes against the Tamil minority community in the conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was a foregone conclusion. After all UN means US and in reality the resolution, long overdue, was US-sponsored. These days New Delhi could ill-afford to distance itself from any move initiated by Uncle Sam in international arena. During the planned ethnic cleansing of Tamils in Sri Lanka India never raised the issue in any forum, hoping not to jeopardise its fragile diplomatic relationship with Colombo. India helped the US win in Geneva only to lose its own initiative. And by backing US censure motion at this stage it is unlikely for the Sultans of Delhi to gain mileage in diplomacy in South Asian theatre. The voting on the all-important UN resolution shows the extent of isolation India has been in. While 15 countries including China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Russia voted against the resolution, eight nations abstained. China cannot antagonise Sri Lanka where it has huge economic and strategic interests. Nor can Pakistan oblige India to lose its edge in the weakest regional forum of South Asian Area Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Better late than never! Sonia Gandhi's Congress Party being a prisoner in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) cage, had no option but to finally yield to pressure exerted by its southern coalition partner DMK. The Gandhinas have a chequered history of betraying their own people. The refugees from the erstwhile East Bengal continue to suffer even today because the Congress never wanted to resolve the crisis in its entirety. There is no point in suppressing brutalities shown by the LTTE but it is equally heinous to legitimise Sri Lanka's illegal acts against the Tamil minority community. For all practical purposes Tamils in Sri Lanka are being forced to live in the torturous conditions as second class citizens, always apprehending army brutalities. Tamil Tigers provided an excuse but it was a genocide for which the Sri Lankan army had no accountability. Not that government leaders and their army generals in former Yugoslavia were unstable lunatics but they had to face international war crimes tribunal for their crimes against humanity in Bosnia. What has happened to Sri Lankan Tamils is no less gruesome and barbaric than the Bosnian nightmare. And yet the Sri Lankan army and its political masters continue to defend the indefensible ethnic cleansing of minority Tamil people. Incidentally April 2012 marks 20 years since the start of the genocide in Bosnia. This was a deliberate state-sponsored attempt by Serbian President Milosevic and to a lesser extent Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, to destroy the multi-ethnic Bosnian society in which Muslims, Serbs and Croats had co-existed peacefully.

Most political parties, not excluding the left parties maintained a kind of calculated silence about medieval barbarism that the Sri Lankan army resorted to. But Sri Lanka's Tamil ethnic crisis didn't fall from the blue. It is one more area of British legacy in South Asia and India cannot deny the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities left by history. Barring a

few human rights bodies, no political party came forward to make it a poll issue, not to speak of a national agenda, having broader ramifications in society.

Bengal's refugee problem is Bengal's problem. And Sri Lankan Tamil problem is Tamil Nadu's problem. The rest of India looks the other way. Then they never get tired to eulogise the concept of 'unity in diversity' whenever there is an occasion of national importance. India lives at many levels and will continue to live in that way for decades, if not centuries, to come. What goes on in the name of homogeneous cultural integration and identity is sham. The people of Northeast don't think they belong to India. Nor do the Indians in the so-called mainland ever feel the necessity to recognise the distinctive ethnic problems of North East as their own problems.

As for the communist left the less said the better. They don't bother about ethnicity and multiple cultural identities. Class is the only paradigm they depend on. They think they could carry forward the revolution even of their kind, toward socialism or communism, without taking into account the identity issues. As for human rights they think it can at best be a part of drawing room culture, not worthy enough to mobilise masses in their millions and respect sentiments of the people concerned. So they are not in the forefront of mass organising on human rights issues. How intellectuals, liberals and democrats made a powerful anti-fascist popular movement across the globe is now history. Then Spanish civil war broke national barriers to unite peace and democracy loving people against Franco fascism throughout the world. In other words human rights issue motivated people in a big way to take stance against fascism.

Fascism means war. It doesn't matter whether it is green fascism or red fascism. It is terror against civilians and unarmed people. Nor does it matter whether the government is elected or junta-manned. Despite being an elected government the Sri Lankan authorities behaved like fascists when it was the question of recognising Tamil ethnic identity. It was Sinhala chauvinism all the way, it was their official policy and played havoc with the lives of ordinary Tamils.

The evolution of Tamil national question or sub-nationalism as one may call it, in Sri Lanka, has a long history. It was the anti-thesis of Sinhala chauvinism that could be credited with a series of anti-Tamil pogroms before the bloody conflict between LTTE and the Sri Lankan security establishment broke out. Tigers were no less barbaric even towards their fellow travellers who differed with them on ideological and political grounds. But the Sri Lankan army didn't distinguish between hardliners and moderates, they launched a war, a war of ethnic cleansing *a la* Bosnia, technically speaking against its own people to deny them any democratic space to assert their rights. Equality is fundamental to modern human history. Tamils like their Sinhala counterparts in Sri Lanka are entitled to equality. It remains to be seen whether the UN Resolution could really bring Sri Lankan security authorities responsible for genocide, to International War Crimes Tribunal. □□□