STATELESS TAMILS: THE MANY IRONIES OF NATIONHOOD IN INDIA AND CEYLON, CIRCA 1948

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STATELESS IN A NEW NATION: THE PLANTATION TAMILS OF CEYLON

In 1948, Ceylon became an independent nation-state. The transfer of power from the British to a group of largely upper class Sinhala political leaders left the former still in command—the tea plantations, the most important sector of the economy remained in British hands and under the control of the planters. The devolution of power had begun in the 1920s, as in British India and was completed in 1948. Meanwhile, a political logic had been set in place which placed Sinhala elites, espousing a strident nationalism that was alarmingly exclusive, in positions of advantage, both in the Parliament and in political society at large. The Ceylon Tamils, from the north and east had become minorities—earlier in the heyday of colonial rule, they were elected on a the basis of what was called a communal franchise, but on the eve of the Independence, as indeed it had been for some time, the franchise was based on territorial and demographic considerations. This left the numerically large Sinhala-speakers a permanent political majority, and the Ceylon Tamils were reduced to a perpetual political minority. In a context where political identities did not always transcend language and ethnicity, and were not as marked by the experiences of a shared anti-colonial struggle as had happened in other parts of the British Empire, numbers and majorities appeared dangerously linked to each other.

However, in 1948, when Ceylon became independent, an entirely other set of issues was perceived to be at stake. One of the first things that the government of independent Ceylon did was to pass a set of acts that more or less disenfranchised and rendered stateless nearly 9,00,000 'Indian' Tamils who lived in the Central highlands and in the south of the island. This measure was supported by a section of the elected Tamil political leadership, who were all Ceylon Tamils. Representatives of the left and some others, who refused to give into the ruling party's rhetoric about

Indians swamping the island voted against the measure. The acts were also challenged in court, but were subsequently upheld.

A substantial number of Indian Tamils, thus, disenfranchised were plantation workers: from at least the 1830s, their ancestors had left their homes in the Coramandel plains to seek work and fortune in the island. This traffic in labour had been persistent, and had stopped only in 1939, but resumed later through the war years. Others comprised traders, professionals of various sorts, including middle-men or *kanganies* responsible for supplying labour to the planters. Besides, there were other Indians in the island who were also brought under the purview of the new citizenship laws. These included rich merchants and traders from Tamil Nadu and from the west coast of the undivided India: Chettiars, Sindhis, Bohras, Memons, Agha Khanis and sundry others who had forged enduring trade links across the Indian Ocean. There was also a community of Malayalis, in the highlands and in cities, in various urban and semi-urban professions.

The laws that Indian merchants and wealthy and middle-class professionals had to work with were less stringent, but the ones that sought to restrict voting and other rights of plantation workers were harsh. They required workers to submit proof of their domicile and take out registration certificates: while this seemed simple enough on paper, in practice they were required to participate in a tortuous process that had been set in place to precisely deny them the rights that they sought (S. Nadesan, *A History of the Upcountry Tamil People in Sri Lanka*, Nandalala, Sri Lanka, 1993: pp. 147-57). Remarking on the menacing absurdity of these regulations, a left member of Ceylon's first elected parliament noted wryly that even several Sinhala natives may not be able to satisfy the criteria demanded by the citizenship acts (ibid, 153).

This move to disenfranchise the Tamil plantation workers proved successful—and may be seen as the culmination of a process that began in the 1920s, when the Donoughmore Commission, the equivalent of the Simon Commission, looked to include natives in government. While endorsing universal franchise, the Commission had laid down criteria to do with literacy and rules of domicile for the Indian Tamils, as they were called; which effectively meant that a very miniscule section of that community alone could vote. Even then Sinhala and elite Tamil political leaders had been vociferous in resisting the granting of any sort of rights to the Indian Tamils, especially the plantation workers. Sinhala elites had been particularly articulate on the subject and through the depression years and into the 1930s had buttressed their national and ethnic claims through disparaging and threatening references to the Indian Tamils who they argued were taking jobs away from the Sinhalese. Somewhat hysterical

and shot through with class pride and arrogance, this translated in public parlance into veritable hate-speech. On the other hand, these very elites did not want labour supply chains to snap and supported migration – stating that the plantations had to be kept going and cheap labour was the means to do this (ibid: 125).

This see-sawing between denigrating and demanding Tamil labour took place in a context that was framed by a medley of other considerations. I would like to briefly expound on each of these.

DISENFRANCHISEMENT: FRAMING CONTEXTS

(a) The outcry against the Indian Tamils has to be understood in the context of a more generalized hostility towards Indians that was loudly voiced from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Indian merchant groups, the Bohras, Sindhis and the Tamil Chettiars were central to the island's economy, and this was highly resented by an emergent class of the Sinhala bourgeoisie: Sinhala-Buddhist ideologues had exhorted violence against Muslim traders in 1915, but in the 1930s, it was the Chettiars who were held up as an example of Indian mercantile greed. Efficient and canny usurers that they were, the Chettiars obtained loans from established banks to service small trades and businesses, which meant that they directly dealt with the Sinhala tradesman. During the depression years, they foreclosed mortgages and repatriated funds to India and this naturally enough rendered them objects of public anger (ibid: 126-127).

Unfortunately, class anger and resentment against this section of Indian Tamils were visited on plantation labourers who came to bear the brunt of what subsequently transpired—and who actually had the most to lose when they were declared non-citizens. The Chettiars cleared out with their capital during the war years, other professionals had the means to prove their domicile status, but where were the workers to go? As they remarked, when they were asked if they would flee a prospective Japanese army movement into Ceylon, they knew no other home, but the plantation, where their forefathers lay buried.

Tragically, a section of the larger working class in Ceylon was itself not immune to anti-Indian (and anti-Indian Tamil) rhetoric: A.E. Goonasinghe who had been one of the first to organize plantation labour in the 1920s had taken to playing the anti-Indian card effectively during the depression years. His organization was influential amongst urban workers, many of whom were inclined to accept the thesis of the Sinhala elites that the Indian worker represented the greatest threat to the well-being of the Sinhala peasant and labourer (ibid: 134). Interestingly, the class of Indians that Goonasinghe took against comprised almost wholly

of Malayalis, who in this newly emergent lexicon of hate, were referred to as being akin to the 'Jewish' menace in Germany! This resentment against Malayalis was still greater because many amongst them had taken Sinhala wives, and this 'racial mixing' seemed portentous to Sinhala nationalist ideologues. In the 1920s, Goonsinghe had demanded that the franchise be extended to the plantation labourers but in the 1930s, in the post-depression years, he spoke a new language of race and ethnicity: he was still a labour man, he declaimed, but would henceforth only support the cause of the Sinhala working class. He saw the latter as essentially beleaguered and in need of protection—from hordes of Malayali labourers. Goonasinghe had fallen out meanwhile with fellow Tamil union organizer, Natesa Aiyer and his interest in the cause of plantation labour had ceased gradually

(b) Even as Sinhala politicians sought to restrict the rights of plantation labourers, and to retain levels of exploitation at as intense a pitch as possible, they had to address, and engage with the government of British India—its officials were nervous about possible Indian nationalist ire over the treatment meted out to their fellows in Ceylon, and invoking the right of British Indians to equal treatment under the law in all places where the writ of Empire ran, they parleyed with the Ceylonese government and its politicians to this end. Their motives were twofold: they wanted labour conditions to not deteriorate beyond a point and they did not want to be seen as not defending the rights of their subjects. These parleys did not lead to substantial changes, but it kept up the pressure on the government of Ceylon. Ultimately, it would seem that the wariness, which shadowed British Indian efforts, ended up pushing Sinhala politicians into more and more exclusivist and intransigent positions with respect to the labourers.

(c) In any case, in 1948, there were other reasons as well for the government of independent Ceylon to act in the manner that it did. Through the war years, Ceylon witnessed a spate of strikes, both of the industrial and urban unions as well as the emergent plantation unions. The latter were organized under different banners and names, and the atmosphere in the plantations was restive throughout the 1940s (ibid: 129). The Ceylon Workers' Union, linked to the Ceylon Indian Congress, was active, as were the Unions affiliated to the Left parties. Their influence and ability to cause workers to agitate rendered the planters and their friends in independent Ceylon anxious. And there was plenty to be anxious about: A general strike in 1946 had been enormously successful, and the old government, elected before Ceylon became independent, had rushed through a Public Security act to deal with unrest on the streets and in work places. Another general strike that broke out in 1947 met

with reprisals and the unions had to retreat (ibid: 148-49).

The first elections in independent Ceylon saw many Leftists elected to the parliament (the Trotskyite Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), linked to the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India was the principal left party but the party of rule was the newly formed United National Party (UNP), which comprised the old Sinhala elites, whose politics was consistently emblazoned with anti-worker slogans and an anti-left hatred. Determined to break the back of the left, the UNP embarked on a series of measure, including acts which regulated trade unions and re-defined public security—the citizenship laws have also to be seen in this context. The Left meanwhile stood its ground and opposed disenfranchisement, as I have noted: after all they had been successful in organizing across ethnic lines and felt hopeful that a more equal and less hysterical politics would prevail.

But the prognosis for Left's success did not appear good in the first decade of Ceylonese independence. For one, the LSSP split, regrouped and split again. The Communist party with which it tried to forge a unified left front was intransigent and further as inclined to play by the rules of parliamentary democracy, which left both parties wrestling with pragmatism. This was particularly evident in the alliances forged by the Left—always already negative, directed against the hated UNP and, therefore, linked to parties that were as cavalier about democracy and as racial in their approach—for instance, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which promised to be different from the UNP and a party of the people. Populist to the core, and yet redolent with Sinhala pride, the politics of the SLFP subsumed whatever resistance the LSSP—and other left constituents in parliament—could offer to the government's unabashed anti-Tamil policies at a later date (Kumari Jayawardene, *Ethnicity and Class in Sri Lanka*, 1986, Centre for Social Analysis).

LABOUR AND ETHNICITY: IN CEYLON AND MALAYA

The point is the determined anti-left policies of the UNP, on the one hand, and the politics of accommodation that the SLFP offered, on the other, rendered the Left vulnerable in the face of an emergent and till date dominant Sinhala majoritarian politics. Ethnicity, in other words, overdetermined class politics—ethnicity though was not merely a matter of ideology, culture and faith, but was constitutive of, and in turn constituted by electoral democratic politics, through practical acts of contestation and representation. In this sense, ethnicity was the very stuff of democratic practice. In as much they were part of the democratic process, left parties too had to heed its terms.

The developments in Ceylon in the 1940s and the following decade are comparable to what transpired in Malaysia during the same period and after. As World War II ended, the British returned to Malaya and claimed their earlier authority to rule. They did this in spite of the fact that they had seen it fit to relinquish this authority, when they fled in the wake of the Japanese invasion. In any case, post-war, they found themselves having to deal with the well organized and popular Communist Party of Malaysia. During the next ten years, from 1947-57, they worked very hard to destroy its influence and leadership. For one, they declared a state of emergency that lasted the decade and for another, they embarked upon a policy of ruthless murder and deportation (Philip Deery, *Malaya 1948 , Britain's 'Asian Cold War'*, Working Paper 3, The Cold War as Global Conflict, International Centre for Advanced Studies, New York, 2002). In place of class war, they promoted a seemingly multi-ethnic politics, of accommodation and cooperation—the details of how they achieved this make very interesting reading, especially from the point of Indian experiments with governance and rule in our own multilingual, multi-ethnic context—that ultimately usurped the place of the Left alternative, rendering it powerless and a constant object of state suspicion and violence (Chris Rowley and Mhinder Bhopal, *The Ethnic Factor in State-Labour Relations: The Case of Malaysia*, Capital & Class, No. 88, pp 87-115).

My interests in these developments outside the borders of India have to do with a set of issues that actually devolve on our own experience of freedom, violence and democracy in the decade of the forties and after. The first set of issues has to do with how we sought to define citizenship, and the second to how we engaged with questions of class and labour while doing so.

IN INDIA: DETERMINING CITIZENSHIP IN THE 1940S

In 1947 and the years that followed, the question of citizenship in India proved a fraught one. This much is a truism. The refugee, the returnee and the abducted woman were the figures that haunted discussions of identity and belonging, in a sociological as well as legal sense. Each of these categories suggested a type who was a citizen in the making: defined as 'ours' by virtue of being within our borders, they bore the marks of creatures in transit. Would they prove loyal? Would they make their homes here? Are all our women recovered? What of those that did not wish to return?

In all this, the labour migrant was not yet a cause for concern or anxiety. In any case, the matter appeared settled as far as South Africa, the Caribbean, the Fiji islands and Mauritius were concerned. Separated by

distance and time, Indians in these places did not appear a fraught group as far as citizenship issues were concerned. Nationalists in India were aware of the special problems confronting Indians, particularly Indian labour in Ceylon. They were sympathetic, responsive to public opinion in Madras, but their responses, when it came to policy or action were far more ambiguous. Thus, each time he had to take stock of the situation, and he did so, on every occasion the matter of their rights to domicile in the island was raised, Nehru hastened to add that while plantation Tamils were people of Indian descent, they were not 'Indian'; indeed they could not be, because they were not territorially part of India when she became independent (Gopalakrishna Gandhi, *Nehru and Sri Lanka*, Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha, 2002).

On the other hand, they were clearly being duped into statelessness and that combined with their labour status were matters of concern to Indians, Nehru explained.

It seems that in considerations of citizenship where residence or domicile, descent and genealogy, kinship and affiliation appear paramount, the labour migrant, saddled with an interrupted and discontinuous history, proved a conundrum. In this sense, Nehru's and more generally the nationalist point of view was symptomatic of a larger problem: how was one to engage with those who had been historically displaced and whose claims to citizenship derived not merely from culture, faith or memory, but from the conditions in which they came to labour and which are, paradoxically, historical as well as contemporary? Subjects of an empire when they began their journeys to Ceylon, they found themselves classified as 'Indian' only to realize that 'Indian' could not possibly include them, because historically the India that claimed its citizens did not exist earlier, and when it did begin to exist, they had lost all claims to that space. On the other hand, they were not considered 'Ceylonese' either territorially or by 'origin' —their labour was all they had to claim their place, and it was conveniently and tragically overlooked.

The temporal problem affected them in other ways as well: Tamil labourers had migrated over several generations, and until borders were sealed there was a steady traffic between Ceylon and Southern India. To fix them within borders went against the grain of a still fresh historical memory; on the other hand, labourers in Ceylon had learnt to think of it as home, even as they visited 'their homes' back in India. When it came to a question of citizenship and choice, they had to, were made to choose between one of these homes, and renounce their claims to the other: in the event of course they realised that neither choice was going to prove easy, for both nations demanded evidence of their domicile or descent— the Ceylonese government was clear on how it defined these terms;

whereas free India merely noted that it only wished to receive those who could prove they were 'Indian'. Both countries, it became increasingly clear, did not have a political language that would allow their leaders and parliamentarians to make sense of an identity that was neither conclusively 'Indian' nor 'Ceylonese'.

The question was what entitlements might migrant and transiting labour claim, by way of citizenship? Sinhala nationalists had an answer: they turned the claims of Tamil labour around and argued that the latter had usurped the place of the Sinhalas; as such they were 'alien' and could not claim anything more than what was given to them. Leading Sinhala elites, men such as Senanayake and Bandaranaike, argued that Tamil labourers had no abiding interest in Ceylon because they sent money home and married girls from their native villages (Kumari Jayawardene: op.cit). Such a racialising of labour not only effaced its claims, but also fudged its historic specificity. However, the workers came back with their own claims. Popular songs that were in circulation amongst plantation labourers in Ceylon in the 1940s wondered at the ingratitude of those who would not grant the vote to those that had built roads, bridges and made the hills bloom. The Left also insisted that claims to citizenship must be measured through other indices. Left members in Ceylon's first elected parliament requested their peers to pause for a moment and think of the productive labour of those who were being denied representation, especially what that labour had achieved for Ceylon's growth and progress (ibid).

What was the Indian response? The definitive resolution of this question had to wait two decades, when a pact was signed between India and Sri Lanka (not Ceylon anymore), allowing a large section of the labourers to return to India. This massive resettlement has not been adequately studied and examined. For now I would like to note that this decision too did not raise the question of entitlement—except in a statist sense. It meant now that India would take back its own. At that time or in earlier discussions, labourers were not represented; neither did the question of their productive worth come up.

Now I would like turn my attention to another set of concerns: keeping the Ceylonese instance in mind, especially its literalism, by which I mean the active annulment of the rights of labourers, the outright refusal of the right to representation and civil rights, I would like to examine briefly the relationship between Indian nationalism and the labour question. How did free India imagine citizenship for its labouring classes? How did it engage with the parties of labour, in this instance with the Communist Party of India? It seems to me that there is a significant

parallelism here—which should enable us rework our critique of the nation-state.

AUGUST 1947 AND AFTER: DEBATING CLASS AND REVOLUTION

I would like to start with the year of freedom: in August 1947, the Left was euphoric about independence: P.C. Joshi was enthusiastic about the new dawn and equally about the nationalist leadership, especially Premier Nehru. Many communists had worked closely with the socialist rump in the Congress, and anti-colonialism proved a potent unifier. Nationalists for their part were inclined to be more cautious about the left, as we shall see.

By the end of 1947, however, communist euphoria had receded. From the end of that year, enthused by the Telengana armed struggle and in response to discontent on the ground, communists were in the field again, organizing and protesting free India's policies towards its poor. Nationalists, meanwhile, had to reckon with other things. While Indian nationalism continued to assert its exceptionalist character in and through whatever set it apart from Pakistan and 'Muslim' nationalism, the existence of two independent nation-states meant that this exercise was not particularly meaningful anymore. The Hindu right might benefit from it, but not an imminent republic. On the other hand, the hurt of Partition was still fresh and the nation's rulers did not obviously take their sovereign status for granted. (Anupama Roy's careful examination of various cases, of men and women claiming Indian citizenship, while not being easily and identifiably 'Indian' delineates this anxiety remarkably well [Anupama Roy, *Sifting, Selecting Relocating Citizenship at the Commencement of the Republic,* CWDS, Occasional Paper, No. 54]). Thus, we have the nation-state distinguishing between those who protected and embodied the national-sovereign and those who were clearly set against it or whose actions seemed inimical to the national-sovereign. The communists clearly belonged to the second group, as did sundry others, including E.V.R. Periyar's Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) in the Madras Presidency.

After all, at the second Communist Party Congress held in Calcutta in early 1948, B T Ranadive had thundered that the freedom of 1947 was a false freedom, a lie. The 'Political Theses' adopted at the Conference noted:

> Its [Congress government's] establishment does not mean that the Indian people have won either freedom or independence, nor does it ensure that they will be moving in the direction of democracy and freedom for the people. On the contrary, the government has already made a big move in the opposite direction - against the

interests of the freedom of the people. It is linking itself with the Anglo-American bloc of imperialist powers - a bloc which seeks to crush all democratic revolutions and to create satellite states. It is manoeuvring to find an advantageous position for itself in the Anglo-American bloc. (Quoted in Sekhar Bandhopadhyay, *The Communists in Post-colonial Bengal: the Untold Story of Second Tebhaga*, Paper presented to the 16th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Wollongong 26 June - 29 June 2006).

This understanding drew its energy and hope, as I have noted above, from the Telengana armed struggle in the main. It also reflected Indian communist responses to Moscow's determined attempts to counter the Marshall plan—everywhere left activism was to be stepped up, and the battle against the ruling classes was not to be abandoned. In the Indian context, this incitement to revolution was understood in its most extreme form: so from supporting the nationalist Congress as a harbinger of freedom, Indian communists veered to the extreme left and announced their determination to build a people's state. As it was said then and subsequently, right opportunism was replaced by left sectarianism. This swing needs to be studied in its own right. I shall merely note that between late 1947 and 1951, Communists moved from insisting on the general strike and armed insurrection in the cities as ways to establishing a people's state, to a proclamation of a sustained peasant struggle wherever possible. In the meanwhile, there was also a call to forge a united front with progressive sections of the bourgeoisie. In 1951, they abandoned this position as well for a more tortuous and complicated one (Sekhar Bandhopadhyay, *Freedom and Its Enemies, Politics of Transition in West Bengal, 1947-49*, http://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10063/720/article.pdf?sequence=3, accessed on May 18, 2013).

These very red years had behind them, as noted above, the tumultuous and prolonged peasants' struggle in Telengana. Tebhaga where sharecroppers had waged a relentless and heroic struggle in 1946 was recalled into public memory and renewed in the closing years of 1947. Free India took note of these developments in a manner that would have done its colonial forbears proud: it banned the Communist party. Its rulers also set in motion a systematic anti-left and anti-labour hysteria that was let loose on the streets. The Communists were termed anti-national, their opposition to 1942 recalled and denigrated and they were accused of being Moscow's puppets and of not having the interests of their nation at heart. In Calcutta, where there was much restiveness a Public Security Act was passed with Congressmen insisting that they were right in doing so, and that the Mahatma himself had approved this decision (Sekhar Bandhopadhyay, ibid).

That the free Indian state should respond thus is not altogether surprising. After all, throughout 1946 and into 1947, provincial interim governments had targeted the Left: during this period of intense trade union, and working class activism the communists had come under fire. Here, I would like to pause and take of a critique of the Indian state from old Madras. It seems to me that this critique is important for reasons that shall become evident.

It is significant that in the preceding August 1947, the Congress seemed a veritable capitalist party at least to some acute observers. Periyar and his Dravidar Kazhagam (DK), for instance, never lost an opportunity to point out that capitalist and Brahminical forces had joined hands to take over the reins of the imminent free Indian state. The DK supported almost every strike that hit the streets in 1946—railwaymen, mill workers, government writers and clerks all struck work, and the DK's weekly, *Viduthalai* wrote editorials endorsing their cause. Periyar's views on issues of class, capital and the nation, as he expressed them in these crucial years are interesting. Throughout 1945-47, he and the DK rejected the idea of India and demanded that they have their own sovereign 'Dravida Nadu'. Dravida Nadu was defined as an idea, a nation whose time had come: it was to be a casteless, class-less and equal society. In such a nation, neither the northern capitalist and his goods, nor faith and its priests would have no place. (Southern capitalists conveniently ignored the Dravida Nadu demand for the most part, and in any case in Periyar's view capital in India was substantially 'northern'.) (S.V. Rajadurai, Periyar: August 15, Vitiyal Pathippagam. 1998. pp 402-452)

Significantly, Periyar understood Hindu India to be constitutively capitalist—captive as much to the *bania* as it was to the Brahmin. In all his writings on the theme, the anti-Aryan character of the Dravidian nation was buttressed by his anger against the union of capital and Aryanism. Unsurprisingly Periyar proposed a Dravidian socialist republic as an option, adding that the name 'Dravidian' was not really important to his project and if need be he was willing to even settle for his 'other ' nation to be called a 'minority India'.

Ideologically, Periyar and the DK's position represented a new politics, and one that drew from a nearly half a decade-old anti-caste radicalism, as well as an acutely prescient and more recent sense of the power of capital. This politics had to yet cogently think through the relations of exploitation and oppression, and how they merged, diverged and of the means to address both forms of injustice in tandem. In practical political terms, being a non-class movement, the DK did not have a strategy to integrate these concerns from the point of view of exploited labour and against

capital. But in conceptual terms the DK was willing to push arguments in different directions, and not at all dogmatic; it was willing to learn from labour and class struggles, but insisted that such lessons be learned anew in the context of a socially hierarchical society. For the Left, these questions hinged on how they wished to plan for a 'democratic revolution', on attitudes to be struck towards the liberal bourgeoisie, the progressive rich peasant, parliamentary democracy and on how they saw the various 'stages' of revolution'. For the DK, these ways of thinking through what was to be done were neither adequate nor available. They were in search for a political language that would yoke anti-capitalist and anti-caste concerns, and the theoretical apparatus of Marxism, while substantial and significant was not enough. The other political register that was available, of ethnicity, nationalism and self-determination, while enormously productive given the attention that the Pakistan demand received and the debates that grew around it, found favour with the DK. It attempted to accommodate its own sense of an alternative national community within the terms of this register, but if one were to read the record, the manner in which the idea of Dravida Nadu was expounded, it becomes clear that this register too was inadequate to the intermeshed issues that the DK wished to address.

In any case, it is not surprising that in the 1940s, the DK and the Communists did not make common cause when it came to challenging the free Indian nation-state. This conversation that could have been was eventually overtaken by the heady rhetoric of a rhetorical language-based nationalism. In the late 1940s, though matters did not appear so foreclosed. In 1948, the Communist party was banned—the DK opposed that measure, mocked at the democratic credentials of free India and its leading activists and ideologues supported the communists in their underground years in any number of ways. This practical and political comradeship and goodwill which could have been made the basis for a radically different approach to addressing the conundrum that was free India dissipated gradually—for reasons that cannot be examined here, but some of them had to do with the conversations that they never had.

It seems to me that this non-conversation is symptomatic of the dilemma that has beset the Indian left from that period onwards. The vilification of the left, the assertion that they were enemies of the sovereign Indian state, the subsequent violence and the ban: a triumphant Indian nationalism fed its fire by stoking up much political hatred. Class war, thus, came to be seen as seditious and the left soon realised that if it were to survive, it would have to accommodate itself to the politics of Indian nationalism: of electoral democracy in a unitary state. While it remained vigilant to this or that aspect of the state's coercive power and violence, the left did not develop a class-caste critique of the nation-state—Periyar

and the DK are important in this context and point to possibilities that were compromised in the melee of votes, elections and the politics of representation.

In the years when the ban was in force, 1948-51, communist leaders sorted out their ideological and political differences—these had to do with different approaches in the party to the question of the Indian revolution: whether it would follow the Chinese model or the Russian; the relative importance to be granted to peasant struggle, as it had unfolded in Telengana; the usefulness of the general strike and urban insurrection as class weapons; the nature of the relationship to the bourgeoisie, the rich peasants, and whether progressive sections of these classes ought to be imagined as part of a people's front, a united front; and the importance or otherwise of utilizing democratic institutions and practices to wage a new democratic revolution. Moscow and the Communist Party if the Soviet Union were involved in these debates and the final resolution clearly bore the mark of Moscow's hand. What is important to our purpose is that the Communists after much soul-searching decided to give up the Telengana armed struggle, and to contest elections.

The first aspect of this decision, recalled with much angst by Sundarayyah, in all its painful detail makes sober reading, and alerts us to the manner in which the nation-state in defense of its sovereignty can and will wage war against its own citizens, if need be, especially its more militant ones (Resolution to Withdraw Armed Struggle, in P. Sundarayya, *Telengana Peoples' Struggle and Its Lessons*, pp. 426-429, http://202.41.85.234:8000/hi-res/hcu_images/G4.pdf, accessed on May 18, 2013). The decision to contest elections owed in part to the triumph of the rightist faction in the party and the manner in which their reasoning fitted in with Moscow's Cold war interests. The Soviet Union wanted 'peace' in the region, and secure free India's support for its policies. Its leaders advocated that Indian communists not disregard the progressive potential of bourgeois institutions such as parliament. While the Communist party reserved the right to call into question the legitimacy of the Indian state, if necessary through armed means, this aspect was not pushed into public attention. The parliamentary option was – and this, it appears, was as the rightists in the party wanted (Mohan Ram, *The Telengana Peasant Armed Struggle, 1946-1951,* Economic and Political Weekly, June 9, 1973, pp. 1025-1032).

In the event, the Communist party meanwhile found itself having to navigate the subtleties of parliamentary politics as well as the glaring and self-evident politics of class, labour and the peasantry. In Ceylon and Malaya, as we saw, ethnicity trumped the politics of class. In India, nationalism attempted to do the same—banning the party was only the

beginning of a long war of attrition, relieved only by the seductive excitement of parliamentary politics. The Communists, like their counterparts in Ceylon, were drawn into a political process whose terms were set, and which was resilient enough to accommodate their assertions of equality and justice. Sadly, in the years that followed, communists never quite saw it fit—until the 1960s—to challenge the certainties of nationalism and the nation-state from the point of view of class.

THE SACRIFICE OF LABOUR: AS IN CEYLON, SO IN INDIA

The literal racialising of the politics of class in open defiant terms in the Ceylon of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the consequent placing of a large section of the working class beyond the pale of the political, thus rendering it invisible: this is where I began my argument. It seems to me that the Ceylonese example is a measure that we may productively use to re-ask questions about the Indian nation state and its sovereign claims. While contested and interrogated in many contexts since then, invariably such contestations have hinged around counter-national or ethnic assertions, leavened from time to time by considerations of federalism and to lesser and more feeble extent, class: to re-ask questions from a historical class perspective would mean not merely repeating the truisms of how communists ought to regard the demand for national self-determination, but to consider our messy historical record as we became a nation, and ask why it was necessary for labour and class to have been banished from considerations of the national good, and our sovereign status.