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Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

NEELAN AND THE UNFINISHED PEACE PROJECT

This issue of *Pravada* focuses on the death and memory of Dr. Neelan Thiruchelvam, who was assassinated on July 29. The outrage and devastation felt by his colleagues, friends and admirers in Sri Lanka and abroad was powerfully expressed in the hundreds of tributes and messages of condolences. No death of any other Sri Lankan individual has evoked so much shock and sympathy within the intellectual community.

The killing of Neelan Tiruchelvam was a premeditated political act. Even after his charred body was cremated, his detractors, particularly of the Sri Lankan Tamil community, continue to 'assassinate' and besmirch his life and memory. Some of those who engage in the anti-Tiruchelvam propaganda of vilification appear to feel triumphant and rather proud of their acts which may be described as simply indecent. Yet, that is how two decades of extreme nationalist politics of the Sri Lankan Tamils reveals its own tragic limitations. It kills dissent, difference and moderation. It thrives on devouring its own innocents. It rejoices in the death of its own soul.

That apart, even in Neelan Tiruchelvam's absence, the central problem to which he devoted his constant attention will remain the most immediate issue of Sri Lanka's politics. How can peace be restored in Sri Lanka?

On the question of bringing Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict to an end, there appear to be a number of perspectives which interestingly overlap ethnic divisions. The most powerful and seemingly enduring perspective is a militaristic one shared by the ex-

tremes of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms. Extreme Tamil nationalism believes in a protracted war that would eventually create political space for a separate Tamil state. Extreme Sinhalese nationalism believes in an equally protracted war that would eventually triumph over Tamil separatism. These two perspectives are at one level mutually exclusive and stand in extreme hostility to one another. Yet, they are also mutually complementary. The simple logic here is that one extremism cannot survive without the other. A second perspective combines the military with the political. Its central assumption is that once the other party "the enemy" is weakened militarily, a settlement favorable to one's own side could be worked out at the negotiation table. The Colombo government appears to hold this perspective. Its slogan of 'war for peace' to a great extent encapsulates that position.

There is a third perspective which focuses on negotiations as a means to ending the conflict. Neelan Tiruchelvam was one of its passionate advocates. The negotiationist school of thought indeed has many advocates and a variety of approaches. Sections in the PA government as well as the UNP and Tamil parliamentary political parties generally share the negotiation option. But, there are differences as to how a negotiation strategy is to be worked out and implemented. Some advocate international, or third party, mediation while others would caution about involving an outside party. The idea of 'third-party facilitation' has emerged in this context of caution about internal mediation. The notion of facilitation accords a restricted role to the third party in the sense that what is prudently

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Editors

**Jayadeva Uyangoda
Kumari Jayawardena**

*Executive Editor and
Circulation Manager*
Rasika Chandrasekera

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required is the facilitation of communication between the two adversaries in conflict.

In a way, the negotiation option is at present the most difficult and the least worked-out perspective of the Sri Lankan conflict. It is difficult due to a variety of complex reasons. The government in Colombo and the LTTE do not seem to place much confidence in the negotiation option, primarily due to the deep mistrust they have of one another. The negative body of experience in past negotiation exercises remains a formidable dead weight, crippling their minds. There is also a fear of negotiations, particularly in Colombo. The fear is that the LTTE is most likely to manipulate the negotiation process for its own military advantage. Then, there is the question of the credibility of negotiations. The past failures in negotiations have resulted in creating an atmosphere of scepticism about the outcome of negotiations.

Quite apart from these difficulties, any serious suggestion for negotiations raises a host of complex issues. To begin with, it is not

easy to envisage a situation where both the government and the LTTE simultaneously feel and propose that the two sides should talk to each other. It has now become the practice for one party to scorn the other's proposal for talks, or even to suggest pre-conditions that would in effect nullify the adversary's offer. It is in this background that the idea of third-party mediation has been figuring from time to time. If the two adversaries cannot come to the table on their own, the mediationists argue, let a third-party bring them together and assist them in negotiations and in working out a settlement.

What would be the most effective process of negotiations? This is yet another area of great complexity. All past experiences of conflict negotiations in Sri Lanka point to some of the inherent weaknesses of the process itself. These weaknesses were present in the way in which both the government and the LTTE went ahead with negotiation exercises. A weak process can jeopardize the entire negotiation attempt, because one of the two mutually distrusting parties may always be tempted to take unilateral action to terminate talks in a situation of uncertainty. As Sri Lanka's past experience clearly demonstrates, the process should be strong enough to rescue negotiations from such crisis moments. Similarly, there should be a tremendous degree of preparation for negotiations and to meet contingencies that would arise in the course of negotiations. The time-frame, the agenda, the framework of compromise, how to deal with non-negotiable issues, bargaining strategies, public relations, all these constitute vital components of a prudent negotiation process.

Then comes the nitty-gritty of the settlement itself. The LTTE stands for a maximalist alternative, "a separate state" which is not a negotiable outcome at any stretch of imagination. No state will conceivably compromise with the adversary's maximum demand, unless it is made necessary by compulsions of self-preservation. Similarly, a nationalist guerilla organization like the LTTE, which has built up a considerable military capability and political resource base abroad, is unlikely to make an easy political compromise with the state, unless it finds its military option

no longer viable. Against such a background, how could the two parties make a move towards a settlement? And indeed, a settlement presupposes the gruelling task of finding a common ground on which the two sides can negotiate a mutually satisfying outcome. But this is easier said than done. In a protracted ethnic conflict, retreat from original positions is no easy task. It demands years and years of hard work against formidable odds.

Even when a common ground is mapped out between the government and the LTTE, it would not mean that a settlement is yet possible. A settlement would require that the adversaries begin to work together in search of a shared outcome that can be translated into political and constitutional structures. A settlement should be an outcome about which neither party would eventually regret. It should also be one that can inspire support from Sri Lanka's ethnic communities. It should indeed inspire new hope among different communities for peace, reconciliation, progress, justice and well-being.

Neelan Tiruchelvam is pilloried, even after his death, partly because he was the most committed politician of Sri Lankan society to devote his intellectual energy and institutional resources to address the issues outlined above. He stood for a negotiated settlement to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict and understood that a settlement process would be infinitely complex and difficult. That is precisely why he encouraged, and created institutional space for research, reflection, discussion and debate on these issues. He facilitated exchange of experience and knowledge about instances where seemingly intractable and protracted conflicts were resolved through dialogue and negotiation. He knew that making peace in an internal ethnic war was to some an unpopular proposition. He also knew that strategizing peace was more difficult than being an apologist for a tribalized war for ethnic exclusivism. But, strategizing peace in Sri Lanka is an unfinished project. The greatest tribute we can pay Neelan Tiruchelvam is carrying forward in Sri Lanka the noblest of the political projects of the contemporary world: strategizing peace through negotiation for conflict resolution.

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