

conflicts. If these were consistently reported, the myth of the isolated, generic ethnic conflict would be blown to bits.

While this myth is now old hat with regard to Sri Lanka, there was a new twist added to coverage in the past year. That is that the conflict situation may be unsolvable. In today's 'new world order' this aspect is key. We see countries where government structures of control are crumbling, with armed factions left to play out the great game. The world just watches; whole countries and/or peoples are deemed expendable. And if at some future time Sri Lanka has to be written off, it will be. And what easier place to write off than a small island nation far away from Europe and the U.S.? For now the message being sent is clear: the conflict in Sri Lanka is reasonably contained, and foreign investors can chance a five, ten or fifteen-year dip into the Sri Lankan market. That's all that matters.

In the end, the New York Times' highly influential strategy of news coverage by ethnic stereotype certainly raises questions about the adoption of similar tactics by varied Sri Lankan groups and individuals. Whose game is who playing? What short-term advantage will in the long-term accrue to whom? Both very unsurprising questions to be sure.

So how about us New Yorkers?

Here in the New York City area, the coverage of local news plays out like this. Outside of the multi-cultural

nature of crimes, the most covered Whites are politicians or businessmen; the most covered Blacks are perpetrators of crime, members of the nation of Islam or sports/entertainment stars; the most covered of Jewish people is the fundamentalist Lubavitcher Hasidic sect; the most covered Muslims are those connected with the world Trade Center bombing; the most covered Asians are small shopkeepers (Korean) or Chinese gangs; the most covered Italians are those associated with crime syndicates. It is absurd, especially considering the tiny minority within groups, and within the total population, that these actually are. But there is no doubt that this coverage plays a big role in the development and enforcement of stereotypes, and there are bad vibes in this city.

It is hoped that you the reader will reject these, just as stereotypes of Sinhalese and Tamils must be rejected. As in Sri Lanka, all the stereotypes are not held by all, and for most people the main concern is financial survival. From my vantage point in particular, the Sri Lankan visitor who comes here seeking to increase understanding of the situation in Sri Lanka, or to gain support for some legitimate cause, should not underestimate the dissonance created when such attempts are combined with racial or ethnic slurs on groups, and on Blacks in particular, here in New York.

BOOK REVIEW

CHELVANAYAKAM, FEDERALISM AND ETHNIC POLITICS

Rajan Philips

A.J. Wilson, 1994: *S.J.V. Chelvanayakam and the Crisis of Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism, 1947-1977*. C.Hurst & Co (Publishers Ltd).

Those who are familiar with Prof. A.J. Wilson's academic writings will recall his piece on "The Tamil Federal Party in Ceylon Politics" (*Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies*, July 1966), in which he outlined the communal compact thesis that the transfer of power, in 1948, was predicated on the understanding that Tamils and other minorities will not be discriminated against by the majority Sinhalese. That D.S.

Senanayake, as the island's first Prime Minister, had breached the constitutional compact was S.J.V. Chelvanayakam's reason for launching the Federal Party in 1949. Through all these years, no Sri Lankan government leader has responded substantively to this indictment. Worse still, the constitutional revisions of 1972 and 1978, far from restoring the communal compact, further aggravated the original breach. The mainstream academic community, perhaps with the exception of the late I.D.S. Weerawardena, has traditionally downplayed D.S. Senanayake's breach of trust and ignored the politics of the Federal Party. The fact of the matter is that

the Tamil question became politically unexpendable and academically unavoidable, and even remunerative, only when the non-violent and the constitutionally limited opposition of the Federal Party was superseded by the separatist cry and its functional ally, political violence.

More than twenty five years after he first introduced the Tamil Federal Party to the international community of scholars, Prof. Wilson has revisited these issues in two persuasive monographs written with scholarly authority and the disillusionment of a long time participant observer. In the first of these books, *The Break-up of Sri Lanka*, published in 1988, Wilson developed the argument that the growing tension between Sinhalese centrepetalism and Tamil centrifugalism has been the determining dynamic of the island's twentieth century political and constitutional developments. For him, the Sri Lankan unitary state is the fusion of the British colonial legacy and the atavistic projections of the dominant sections of the Sinhalese political class. The recent Chelvanayakam biography, inasmuch as it recounts Chelvanayakam's political life, is an exposition of the most enlightened Tamil rejoinder to the challenge of Sinhala hegemony, namely, the Tamil Federal Party which Chelvanayakam founded and led for thirty years.

Honest and Sincere Narrative

Within the genre of biographical writings, the relationship between the biographer and his subject can take different forms. What distinguishes the Chelvanayakam biography, apart from the affinal relationship of the two, is the perfect equipoise between the independent merits of a respected leader and a reputed scholar; one does not have to bask in the glory of the other. The author remains faithful to his academic calling by systematically building his case on a plurality of sources, with personal interviews dating back to 1949 and involving politicians from left to right and on both sides of the communal divide. The result is not a commissioned hagiography based on the subject's selective journal entries, but an honest and sincere narrative befitting the two qualities that Chelvanayakam was widely known for.

The book is divided into seven chapters dealing with Chelvanayakam's early life (Chapter 1), the state of Tamil politics before his time (Chapter 2), his leadership of the Federal Party (Chapters 3, 4 and 5), and the emergence of separatism and Chelvanayakam's historic role (chapters 6 and 7). Wilson prefaces his portrayal of Chelvanayakam's distinctive contributions with a critical appraisal of the Tamil leaders who had preceded him. Particularly insightful is Wilson's perspective on the Chelvanayakam - Ponnambalam schism that was the touchstone of Tamil political debate during the 1950s and the 1960s. The contrasting styles, motivations and appeals of the two leaders mirrored the ambivalent dispositions of the Tamil people. The Tamil electorate first endorsed Ponnambalam, then acclaimed Chelvanayakam, but often preferred both men to be in parliament simultaneously co-operating with and opposing the

government for the benefit of the community. I am tempted to add that, notwithstanding their ambivalence, the Tamil people had a choice over their leaders and were free to exercise it - a freedom which they have lost since both Ponnambalam and Chelvanayakam died in 1977. These concerns, important as they are, should not detract from the main thrust of the book, namely, the political life and leadership of Chelvanayakam. My purpose is to comment on those aspects of the book which relate to Chelvanayakam's political personality, his federalist thinking, his summit diplomacy with three Sri Lankan Prime Ministers, and the defensive nature of Ceylon Tamil nationalism.

Political Personality

Wilson's stated aim is to unravel the mystery of Chelvanayakam's transformation from being the hesitant political groomsman to the flamboyant G.G. Ponnambalam into becoming the "commanding figure" of Tamil politics. A partial explanation is offered in the psycho-analytic thesis that Chelvanayakam compensated for his separation from the father during his adolescent years by becoming the father figure for a politically adolescent people. The thesis is not implausible, but the connection between the early Chelvanayakam and the later political leader is not readily apparent from the book. The book deals somewhat marginally with Chelvanayakam's life experiences outside politics, particularly his professional career and the background to the shift from law practice to politics. In any event, the title "Thanthai Chelva", like the title "Anna" bestowed on C.N. Annadurai in Tamil Nadu, underscore the strong patriarchal nature of the Tamil society, even though Chelvanayakam himself was not an overbearing person.

Early on in the book, in discussing Chelvanayakam's background and character, Wilson refers to his learning to move in two worlds: the traditional Hindu cultural world of Jaffna and the "modern Christian anglicized world of Colombo" (p.4.). The book relates to other worlds as well: the world of his legal profession and the inter-communal networks engendered by a highly successful law practice; the world of the plantations, where he invested, and with whose workers he forged a lasting link of communal identity that cut through the obvious class barrier; the world of the Tamil speaking Muslims and, most of all, the world of the Tamil farmer, the fisherman and the low-rung bureaucrat, the main-stay of Tamil society, to whose otherwise humdrum lives he gave a new meaning in modern political terms. Put another way, Chelvanayakam was quite at home with both traditional Tamil patriotism and the incipient pan-island nationalism of the fledgling Ceylonese middle class. However, as the Sinhalese and the Tamils began to be driven apart, and the Ceylonese middle class became an increasingly endangered species, Chelvanayakam found himself at the helm of an exclusively Tamil camp. But his political personality had already been shaped by the many worlds through which he journeyed, and was manifested in full measure in all his transactions as the leader of his party and of his people.

My point is that, as a political leader, Chelvanayakam did not require either 'minority conceit' or 'minority shame' as coping mechanisms to counter majority intimidation. If conceit and shame can be associated with political isolationism and political co-option, Chelvanayakam was steadfast in eschewing isolationism and abhorring co-option. Wilson provides ample evidence to establish Chelvanayakam's uniqueness among other Tamil leadership claimants of this century. He was not given to brooding in his own lair, but was quite open about his demands, expressing them clearly, without mincing words or speaking too much, and was always prepared to meet, negotiate, bargain and strike honourable deals with the other side. He was also willing to proceed incrementally towards his clearly stated goals. "Interim experiments", "Little now, more later" were his self-confessed strategies. As he spelt out in his pathbreaking speech on the Indian - Pakistani Citizenship Bill debate, in 1949, Chelvanayakam's plea was to "... bring to bear towards the solution of a twentieth century problem a twentieth century mind ..." (p.66). In the same spirit, he turned to federalism as a modern framework to resolve the political conflicts between two linguistic groups caught in the bosom of a single state.

Federalist Thinking

The book offers a revealing account of the range of flexible territorial arrangements that Chelvanayakam and his party had been contemplating as their federalist thinking evolved over the years. The amalgamation of the northern and eastern provinces into a single federal unit was not part of their original federalist schema. The shift from "cantonal federalism" to "regional federalism". and the insistence on the territorial integrity of the Tamil areas were the result of Colombo's intransigence. Chelvanayakam and the Federal Party recognized the territorial specificity of the Eastern Province Muslims and, in all their political stratagems, they had the utmost concern for the plight of the Tamils living outside the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

From the standpoint of fiscal federalism, Chelvanayakam showed remarkable originality in characterizing the two provinces as the "deficit Provinces"(p.69), which would be entitled to their equalization share of the national income to which all minorities contributed regardless of their spatial distribution within the island. On the language issue, the party would seem to have wished the best of both worlds as it pursued both the territorial principle (Tamil as the language of administration in the Northern and Eastern Provinces) and the personality principle (island-wide party of status for individual speakers of the two languages) of language rights.

The Federal Party was ambivalent about retaining English as a link language and the language of higher education, which both G.G. Ponnambalam and S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike were insistent upon prior to the heady days of 'Sinhala only'. Ponnambalam was prophetic in warning that the swabasha only policy in education would create "schisms in the structure of the country" (p.56). Alas, minority political leaders were never able to make any headway with their ideas and

their thinking, given their structural impotency within a unitary political system. Wilson also points to the prevalence of majority communal bias in both the judiciary and the bureaucracy. The latter, in particular, has been a persistent road block to implementing even the occasional political settlement between the government leaders and the Federal Party.

Summit Diplomacy

Between 1956 and 1977, Chelvanayakam engaged in summit diplomacy and reached agreements with two Prime Ministers, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and Dudley Senanayake. For whatever reason, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who was Prime Minister for more than twelve years during this period, did not deal with him directly but assigned the responsibility to Mr. Felix Dias Bandaranaike. We now learn that Chelvanayakam and the Federal Party were victims of the 'satanic' antics of Felix Dias long before Dr N.M. Perera and the LSSP.

Discerning readers will note Wilson's somewhat favourable treatment of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in contrast to his assessment of other Sinhalese leaders. In my view, and based on the material presented by Wilson, there are at least four aspects of Bandaranaike's agreement with Chelvanayakam, which distinguish the slain Prime Minister from the rest: (1) Unlike the other two Prime Ministers, Bandaranaike did not seek an agreement with Chelvanayakam in return for the latter's support in Parliament, either to form a new government or to save a falling government; (2) He was as intellectually capable of appreciating the FP's insistence on structural arrangements to resolve minority concerns (as opposed to relying on the ephemeral goodwill and trust between individual leaders), as he was scrupulously democratic in not seeking to by-pass the Federal Party, or co-opt Tamils from outside the Federal Party into his government; (3) The agreement created for the first time a partisan division within the Sinhalese political class in regard to reconciliation with the Tamils; by successfully campaigning against the Pact, J.R. Jayewardene and the UNP established the precedent that any future agreement between the Tamils and the governing Sinhalese political party will perforce be opposed by the opposition Sinhalese political party; (4) Even after declaring, under duress, that the pact "stands abrogated", Bandaranaike unilaterally pursued his commitments by enacting the Tamil Language Special Provisions Act and by suspending the state plantation of Sinhalese in the northern and eastern provinces.

Unfortunately, when Bandaranaike's widow, Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike, whom Wilson pedantically chides for her "personal ignorance of the consequences of ethnic conflict between communities" (p.124), feudally ignored the duly elected Federal Party and related herself to a Tamil fantasy land of hand-picked political parvenus, the federalists took to extra-parliamentary protests and eventually succumbed to the contagion of the separatist throng. In addition, the Federal Party, and later the TULF, went through phases of

quasi-collaboration with the United National Party, whom Chelvanayakam had castigated, already in 1947, as "nothing more than a congregation of arch-communalists whose past antics and present-day activities tend to disrupt the harmonious relations that have existed among the different communities in the island" (p.18). With the benefit of hindsight and his own experience as an intermediary, Wilson concludes that Chelvanayakam's early warning about the United National Party could not have been more accurate.

Ceylon Tamil Nationalism

Wilson's recurrent theme is that Ceylon Tamil nationalism is a defensive nationalism, and in two paragraphs (pp. 125 & 126) of sustained rigour he provides a brilliant summation of its genesis and growth. His generalization that minority groups tend to escalate their political demands in proportion to the intransigence of the majority is also unexceptionable, albeit with the proviso, I might add, that beyond a certain point the escalated demand (i.e. separate state) and persistent intransigence (i.e. military solution) can lock themselves into a prolonged, painful and costly stalemate.

What is worrisome in Prof. Wilson's recent writings, however, is the allusion to the historical process and a rather teleological view of ethnicity as an agent of change leading to decentralization and disintegration of the 'post-colonial patchwork multi-ethnic states' of South Asia. There are two matters of concern here. First, it is possible to argue that even multi-ethnic state formations can develop a cohesive political culture and resilience, while 'homogeneous' ethnic groupings can devour themselves from within. The lesson from Wilson's analyses is that the survival of a multi-ethnic state, like Sri Lanka, cannot be left to the wishful thinking of its smug middle classes, but will require vision and leadership on the

part of the Sinhalese political class, affirmative state intervention, an impartial and professional bureaucracy, and an independent judiciary.

Second, the notion of historical inevitability relieves political actors of their accountability to their contemporaries and to history itself; while, 'ethnicity' can be a source of justification for the illiberal and undemocratic practices of both majority and minority ethnic groups. The great merit in Wilson's monographs is that they establish responsibilities for the egotistical twists and turns, electoral opportunism, satanic antics, presidential foibles, and all manner of banalities that have shaped our recent communal history. The real tribute to Chelvanayakam, then, is not that he was chosen to be unwittingly seduced by the unseen goddess of history, but that he consciously and successfully kept himself apart from the banalities that surrounded him.

Lastly, my understanding of Ceylon Tamil nationalism is that it is not only defensive, but is also politically over-determined. Put another way, it lacks a self-propelling economic base, and even a strong cultural component. Tamil leaders, in the past, have tried to deal with this dilemma by articulating political demands that were compatible with the economic well being of their people. The genius of Chelvanayakam was that by advocating federalism he offered the Tamils the greatest possible measure of political autonomy without severing their ties to the island's economy. More importantly, the goal of federalism defined the means of its own realization, namely, non-violent protests and constitutional opposition, both of which caused the least disruption to the social and economic lives of the Tamils and the Tamil speaking Muslims. Chelvanayakam offered something more to the Sinhalese, which was not merely goodwill, but a constitutional structure that would have facilitated the growth of a pan-island identity within a politically diverse population, without depriving the Sinhalese of any of their rights and privileges.

PROGRESSIVE WRITERS AND THE PROGRESSIVES: SOME THOUGHTS

Selvy Thiruchandran

Subair Illankeeran's book, *Elatu Mutpokku Illakiyamum Iyakkamum*, (**The Sri Lankan Progressive Literature and the Progressive Movement**) was released recently.¹ Reading through its pages, I was provoked to put into writing some random thoughts though my original intention was to review the book in Tamil. At the outset, I wish to say that I consider this book as a part of a social science project and therefore it is not merely a Tamil publication which has to be reviewed for the benefit of only the Tamil readership.

This book is a timely publication, primarily because there is a historical need for a reconstruction of Tamil literary thought and its history in Sri Lanka. The members of the Progressive Writers' Association have built into their activities a philosophy of progressiveness anchored in universalism and democracy. Their principle of universalism embraces an agenda of ethnic and linguistic diversity. The inclusion in the movement of Sinhala writers as well as many Muslim intellectuals with expertise in the Tamil language and literature reflects the multi-ethnic and progressive character of the movement. At a