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Perceptive observers of Tamil Nadu political scene have highlighted that the origin and growth of Dravidian movement was closely linked with protecting the interests of Overseas Tamils. With the break-up of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the formation of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in October 1972, under the charismatic leadership of MG Ramachandran, the recurring theme developed another dimension, namely competitive politics of one up-man ship. The two Dravidian parties indulged in claims and counter-claims. In that process rhetoric reigned supreme and reality was relegated to the background.

In the upsurge of political and cultural consciousness of the Tamils, the Dravidian movement has played an exemplary role. The Dravidian leaders used to claim that it was their sacred duty to champion the cause of Overseas Tamils. In the popular Tamil film, *Parasakti*, script of which was written by Karunanidhi, the hero Gunasekaran (played by Sivaji Ganesan) posed the question: "Why is the waters of Bay Bengal saltish? It is because of the tears of Overseas Tamils".

It would be simplistic and naive to assume that the problems that the Tamils Overseas face and what the future holds for them are identical. It is inter-twined with the nature of their migration, their educational attainments, their economic clout and, above all, the majority-minority syndrome in countries in which they have settled. The role that Tamil Nadu can play in the amelioration of their grievances is minimal, because majority of the Tamils are citizens of the country in which they have settled. What is more, in many newly independent countries the ruling elite want to build the nation on the basis of the language and religion of the majority people, which has placed the Indian minority groups at great disadvantage.

One also has to keep in mind the seminal changes that have taken place in India since the dawn of independence. The Dravidian political

parties, which not so long ago, used to burn the Constitution and national flag at every conceivable opportunity, have undergone a basic transformation. After coming to power in Tamil Nadu in 1967, they slowly got domesticated. The Ministers take the oath to uphold the Constitution and the Chief Minister hoists the national flag on Independence Day from the ramparts of Fort St. George with decorum and dignity. With the formation of coalition governments in New Delhi and the regional parties sharing power in the Centre their regionalism was further diluted. Even on issues relating to ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka the DMK, which was an important partner in the Man Mohan Singh Government went along with the Centre in its support to the Sri Lankan Government.

The Centre closed its eyes when Karunanidhi indulged in theatrics to retain the support of the Tamils like his famous hunger strike which commenced after breakfast and ended before lunch. The fact, however, must be underlined that Karunanidhi was not willing to part company with the Congress-led central government even in the tragic days when the war against the Tigers had degenerated into a savage war against Tamil civilians. Interests of Sri Lankan Tamils were secondary; remaining in power was the top most priority.

Two case studies are given below.

The first is an illustration of benign inter-action between the state and the centre, which promoted Indian interests in Sri Lanka. The second displayed the utter disregard of the Tamil Nadu government to the plight of Tamils of Indian origin who returned to Tamil Nadu as Indian citizens. The validity of the Sirimavo-Shastri Pact, 1964 and subsequent Sirimavo-Indira Gandhi Pact, 1974, which adversely affected the legal status of the people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka, was to end on October 31, 1981. The Government of Sri Lanka believed that the period will naturally be extended by a few more years. But the Sinhalese chauvinists precipitated a bilateral crisis. They wanted to drive away as many Indian Tamils as possible to India before October 31, 1981. They unleashed organized violence in the plantation areas in May 1981. Thomas Abraham, then Indian High Commissioner in Sri Lanka, brought the hostile attitude of the Sri Lankan Government to the notice of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Thomas Abraham also explained the complexity of the Sri Lankan situation to the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MG Ramachandran. It may be recalled that Ramachandran spent the early years of his life in Kandy and was familiar with the deplorable state and vulnerability of the Indian Tamils in the island. MG Ramachandran led an all party delegation to New Delhi and appealed to the Central Government not to extend the Sirimavo-Shastri Pact. The solid support extended by Tamil Nadu Government was a crucial factor in the decision of New Delhi to stop receiving applications for Indian citizenship after October 31, 1981. The two pacts died a natural death.

How did the DMK Government treat the people of Indian origin from Sri Lanka who returned to Tamil Nadu as Indian citizens? Though the agreement was signed in 1964, the process of repatriation was very slow and the first batch of repatriates arrived only in 1968. The DMK was in power and Karunanidhi was Chief Minister. To the vast majority of plantation Tamils, who opted for Indian citizenship, it was not repatriation, but expatriation. As Fr. Paul Caspersz put it: "Even in a world, where there has been so much else to hit the headlines, it is surprising that the agreements which heralded the largest organized worker migration in the 20th century have gone so largely unnoticed". Most of the grandiose schemes for the rehabilitation of repatriates failed due to unimaginative planning, bureaucratic bungling and red

tapism. For the repatriates, it was a bitter home coming. Unwanted in Sri Lanka and unwelcome in Tamil Nadu and uncared for by the leaders of the Dravidian parties the repatriates were driven from pillar to post. Many of them became bonded labourers in Kodaikanal. The irony of the situation can be understood from the fact that in Tamil Nadu these unfortunate people were referred to as “Sri Lankan Tamils”, a status which they never got in Sri Lanka even after many years of residence in the island.

The World Tamil Conference held in Madurai in January 1981 and the Conference held in Thanjavur in January 1996 reveal how, despite the tall claims of international solidarity with the Tamils, the AIADMK Governments led by MG Ramachandran and Jayalalitha respectively, scrupulously avoided controversial issues. The two conferences were boycotted by the DMK, which highlighted the wide divide between the two parties. In fact the main objective of the Conferences was to boost the image of the AIADMK among the general public. In Madurai, the organizers of the academic sessions were instructed not to entertain any critical research papers dealing with political, economic and educational themes. Thus research papers analyzing the educational status of Tamils in Malaysia were not accepted for presentation. In the mammoth public meeting held in Madurai, Sri Lankan Tamil leader Amirtalingam narrated the pitiable plight of the Sri Lankan Tamils and how the discriminatory policies of successive Sinhalese-dominated governments had reduced them to the status of second class citizens. In the course of his intervention MG Ramachandran appealed to the delegates not to use the Conference for expressing their party's views. He further added that the Government of Tamil Nadu wanted to retain friendship with neighbouring countries and governments.

The Thanjavur Conference was more pompous and ostentatious than the previous one held in Madurai. The LTTE had already been banned in India and the Tamil Nadu government was very keen that the Conference should not be used for expressing pro-LTTE views. There was virtually no representative from the Sri Lankan Tamil community. The well known academic and Tamil writer Prof. K. Sivathamby, who reached Thanjavur a day prior to the Conference, was taken away to Chennai and was put in an aircraft proceeding to Colombo. True to AIADMK style huge cutouts of Jayalalitha “adorned” different parts of the city.

The mounting tragedy in Sri Lanka had its inevitable fallout on Tamil Nadu politics. The state politics during the post-1983 period can be understood only in the backdrop of competitive politics. The responses of the DMK/AIADMK were motivated mainly by their desire to score debating points and stage one up-man ship on the opponent. During 1983-87, the debate centred around as to who was the greater champion of the Sri Lankan Tamil interests. During the post-Accord period, the DMK was highly critical of the IPKF presence in Sri Lanka and its “misdeeds” against Tamil people. In fact, Karunanidhi was the Chief Minister when the IPKF returned to India. As Chief Minister Karunanidhi should have welcomed the returning Indian soldiers, but he boycotted the function stating that the IPKF had “committed atrocities” on the Tamils. After the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by the suicide squad of the LTTE and publication of Jain Commission Report, the AIADMK and the DMK made a sudden somersault; each started accusing the other of supporting the Tigers. The ultimate sufferers were the Sri Lankan Tamils who became pawns in the politicking game.

Much water has flowed through the Palk Bay, but developments in the Island Republic provide ammunition to the two major Dravidian parties to attack one another. During the State Assembly elections in 2011, the Parliamentary elections in 2014 and recent elections to the

State Assembly in 2016 the Sri Lankan issue figured prominently in electoral discourse. Jayalalitha continued to criticize the DMK for its many acts of commission and omission over the years; Karunanidhi's attempts to defend himself and turn the tables on Jayalalitha turned out to be a feeble exercise.

What however must be underlined is the Sri Lankan reality. The Tamil National Alliance which has emerged as the representative organization of the Sri Lankan Tamils want to find an amicable solution to the Tamil issue through negotiations. They are demanding devolution of powers to the Tamil inhabited areas, so that Tamil identity and Sri Lankan identity could co-exist harmoniously. But the demands put forward by the AIADMK are out of sync with what can be achieved in Sri Lanka today. Some of the unrealistic demands include retrieval of the Island of Kachchatheevu and redrawing of the maritime boundary with Sri Lanka; the demand that India should stay away from the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 2013; termination of the training facilities provided to Sri Lankan service personnel in the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington; not to allow IPL matches to be played in Tamil Nadu, where Sri Lankan cricketers will be playing; demand that Tamil Nadu should be consulted before granting visa to Sri Lankan dignitaries; the demand that New Delhi should impose an economic embargo on Sri Lanka and take the initiative in the UNO for declaring those guilty of war crimes as war criminals – all these may be music to the ears of Jayalalitha's fanatical followers, but these demands, in no way will contribute to ethnic reconciliation, which is the need of the hour.

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