

The Party's Stand On the National Question

The National Question and Marxists

Introduction

The national question in Sri Lanka has taken the form of a full blooded war. It has overtaken the fundamental class contradiction of the country to be seen as the main contradiction today. This major contradiction has on its one side the chauvinistic military oppression and on the other the liberation struggle of the oppressed Tamil nationality.

Throughout this century which is nearing its end, the ruling classes have actively encouraged the development of the national problem. The national question has served them well to deflect the attention of the people from the fundamental contradiction between the wealthy exploiting classes and the exploited classes under their rule. During the colonial era as well as the period following the so called independence, oppression of the nationalities has been intensified to ensure the existence and survival of the ruling classes. As a result, people of all nationalities have gradually become polarised on the basis of race, religion and language, and have been pushed to a state where they are unable to recognise their real enemy. The local ruling elite and their imperialist supporters have thus been able to safeguard themselves and secure their position.

Even in the current situation in which the national question has taken the form a war and wreaking havoc, there is a tendency to wilfully ignore the gravity of the situation. There is still no recognition of the need to take into account the objective situation in the country and bring the war to an end by finding a minimum solution to the national question.

Aggravation of the National Question

When trying to solve any problem, it is necessary to identify correctly the historical development of the problem. Historically this country has been one comprising several races, languages and religions. But the fact that this country has a multi-ethnic national character has been denied by differentiation on the bases of first settlers and subsequent settlers, aboriginals and non-aboriginals, majority and minority, descendants of the rulers and others, the age of Buddhism and of other religions in this country and so on. From early this century the notion that Sri Lanka belongs to the Sinhala people and the Buddhist faith has been vigorously promoted so that, even during the colonial era, it was communal thoughts and deeds that were cultivated instead of the carrying forward of anti-colonial liberation struggles. This parochial approach manifested itself in several forms and, after independence, surged forward as blatant communalism in the political arena.

As a result of the above trend the Tamils, Muslims, Hill Country Tamils, Burghers, Malays, the Veddas and other sections of the people were subject to discrimination and marginalisation. Their traditional homelands, economy, education, employment opportunities, religion and culture were seriously affected. Democratic demands put forward against this social injustice were ignored by the ruling classes who wielded political power. At the same time the leadership of the Tamils, Muslims and Hill Country Tamils sought to safeguard its class interests by preserving its ties with those in power. But the people who were long subjected to national oppression gradually found expression to their resentment, and their struggles were put down from time to time.

When their just demands were not taken note of, the Tamil people were attracted to Tamil nationalist extremism. While the Tamil people were forced to fall victim to the illusion that it was right to demand a separate Tamil state, those in power continued to carry out planned acts of violence against the Tamil people. The ethnic violence of 1983 was a major high point of the anti-Tamil policy of the chauvinist government. The 1977-1994 period of United National Party rule ensured that the Tamil people were totally subjected to chauvinistic military oppression.

This period also witnessed the development of the armed struggle of the Tamil youth opposed to national oppression. While communalism developed into chauvinism and then into military oppression, moderate Tamil nationalism became a relentless armed struggle. The resultant cruel war, inherited from the UNP by the People's Alliance government, is today being carried further on an even more elaborate scale.

Addressing the National Question

Under these conditions there are some who argue that the national question is an issue distinct from the war and that the national question is only a matter of some grievances and minor problems of the Tamils while the war concerns terrorism and is therefore inevitable. One need not be shocked to hear such utterances made by spokespersons of the parties of the ruling classes or by the chauvinists. But when such statements are made by people representing some parties which call themselves Marxist, we need to take note of it.

Dialectical materialism is the basis of Marxism and Marxists look at history in accordance with it. They see every issue historically and from the point of view of class struggle. As a result, the Marxist view of matters of economics, politics, society and culture is objective. They do not let their subjective likes and dislikes to influence their recognition of the nature of contradictions. The Marxist view and position relating to truth, honesty, humanity, and social justice are scientific. The socio-scientific historical approach to class struggle provides the basis from which they approach all problems. It is because of this that every Marxist communist of the world puts forward solutions to problems facing him or her to suit the particular circumstances of his or her country.

Marxists do not accept feudal values or religious standards or conservative thought, nor do they accept the concepts of bourgeois ideology. A Marxist, in the course of his or her development, gains a clear view of this world, about the interaction of its contradictions and about his or her role in that process. Such a Marxist does not only become a social thinker but also establishes himself or herself as a sound revolutionary with the potential to transform this world.

Bogus Marxists and the National Question

It will be useful to examine on the above basis the kind of views that the Marxists and social organisations of our country have about the problems facing us. Especially in the matter of the national question and the context of its transformation into a war that is rocking the whole country, one finds a serious lack of clarity among many of the Marxists. On the other hand, this does not mean that honest Marxists have failed to put forward a clear policy on the national question.

Fundamentally, it is essential for a Marxist or a Marxist party to take a position consistent with the Marxist world outlook. It is not possible for a Marxist to have a Sinhalese position, a Tamil position or a Muslim position. Such positions are not Marxist but nationalist. But what is saddening is that those who call themselves Marxists tend to classify positions on the national question as Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim positions and put forward policies designed to suit each of them in turn as Marxist policies.

The reason for their taking such flawed positions is that they had fallen victim to bourgeois parliamentary opportunism. Instead of carrying forward revolutionary struggles and mobilizing the masses on a broad basis, they chose to take the wrong road in the belief that socialism can be achieved peacefully along the parliamentary route. Those who set foot on the slippery road of parliamentary politics slid to its very bottom. These so called Marxists abandoned all their Marxist policies for the sake of gaining a few votes to secure their parliamentary seats. They did not hesitate to fall at the feet of religious leaders, carry flower baskets to places of worship and participate in religious observations.

Efforts to speak circumspectly in a way that did not offend the forces of race and religion led subsequently to positions which were based on considerations of majority and minority along the lines of race, religion and language. On the occasions when Sinhala Buddhist supremacy was asserted through the constitution, its strongest advocates included some who called themselves Marxists. The parliamentary Marxists of today have degenerated to a level that they not only show a lack of courage to speak up against Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism but also lend support to it. While they continue to wave the red flag in ritual fashion, their plight appears to have plunged below that of social democrats

It is absurd for anyone who lacks the courage to oppose chauvinism and Buddhist supremacy to call himself a Marxist Leninist. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, which calls itself the alternative force and Marxist, is unable to take the correct Marxist position on the national question. The reason for this is not only the poverty of their Marxist ideology. They are driven to uphold the opportunistic pro-chauvinist position developed and put forward by their former leader because of the temptation of the chauvinist vote bank. They look at socialism and self determination dogmatically and therefore say that we have to wait for socialism to find a solution to the national question. They fail to see chauvinist military oppression as oppression by the ruling class.

Dangers of Neglecting the National Question

Oppression by anyone in any form should be opposed without reserve by Marxists. Again, on the question of war, Marxists distinguish between just and unjust war. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam are fighting from a purely nationalistic position, using some methods which are unacceptable. Their lack of democracy, intolerance to different points of view and assassination of individuals are not acceptable to Marxists. But the fact that their demands include the genuine aspirations and the future survival of the Tamil people cannot be rejected by any honest Marxist. Also, no Marxist can accept the waging of war against the entire Tamil people of the North-East by branding the LTTE as terrorists and claiming to fight to eliminate the LTTE.

The national question is not something unique to us. It is the outcome of the cultivation of nationalism to reach positions of extremism and has taken the form of struggles and war in the Third World. The October Revolution transformed a Russia which was a prison house of nationalities to give the nationalities freedom, liberty and autonomy under socialism. The Chinese and the Soviet examples demonstrated to the world how nationalities can enjoy freedom and prosperity under socialism. But the fall of the Soviet Union and socialism in eastern Europe led to negative contradictions between the nationalities. Forces of imperialism cleverly created situations in which the nationalities waged war against each other. In addition, the leadership of the ruling classes pursued a chauvinistic line, and sought to oppress other nationalities, and fell victim to the imperialist conspiracy. Yugoslavia serves as a good example for this.

Yugoslavia, once a good example for socialist advancement and unity of nationalities, was splintered into several countries as a result of conflict and war between nationalities. Recently the oppression of the Kosovar Albanian nationality by the Milosovic regime paved the way for US aggression. The chauvinist Milosovic is hailed as a socialist by the JVP who demand the 'return of socialism' to Yugoslavia. The failure of these so called Marxists to notice the genocide and national oppression committed by Milosovic will prove to be a major mistake. It is really a failure to recognise the current international significance of the national question and the fact that the imperialists are using the national question as a major weapon in their hand. Marxists by viewing the national question as merely a question of the relationship between the majority and the minority and failing to recognise the severity of the issues involved will only strengthen the hands of chauvinism. Activities to popularise chauvinism among the Sinhala masses are being carried out on an unprecedented scale. It seems that Marxists do not appear to have the ability to halt it.

The social structure of Sri Lanka is in the grips of the alliance of feudalism, big capital and imperialism and being subject to neo-colonialism. National oppression is an essential tool to ensure the continuation of this situation. The chauvinistic war is being carried out under the guidance of US imperialism under the false pretext of safeguarding the Sinhala Buddhists and salvaging the country from terrorism, in order to justify national oppression and deflect the attention of the masses from the real issues. This course of action will only subjugate the entire country to the US imperialists.

Taking a Principled Stand

Genuine Marxist Leninists have therefore already put forward their understanding of the national question and their position on it. Their position is marked by a Marxist view of history and an approach based on class struggle. They have put forward proposals for solving the national question on the basis of short term and long term programs. Also, they have developed the concept of self determination dialectically in a way that meets the current situation as opposed to taking a static view of it. To thus study and analyse the national question from a Marxist Leninist position and apply the findings in practice is the need of our time. Those who mask their real intentions by using the name of Marxism cannot do so for long.

The tendency for the forces guided by Marxism Leninism Mao Zedong thought, the ideology that will enable the Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and Hill Country Tamil people to transcend differences of race, language, religion and nationality and stand up to their oppressors, to close ranks is becoming increasingly evident. This will put right the current erroneous trend of going along with nationalism and giving Marxism a bad name.

Under these circumstances, all genuine Marxist Leninists should dedicate themselves to the task of strengthening principled policies on all issues including the national question on the basis of the objective reality of the country and free from the illusion of bourgeois parliamentary politics.

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