CHAPTER VII

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Ethnic parties emerge out of the protest against the rule being imposed on them. They aim at seeking some kind of self-rule. In the context of post-colonial era, these groups demand equal status-share in government, or autonomy or even separation to protect their identity and rights. Such demand of the Sri Lankan Tamil political parties was witnessed in response to the increasing majoritarian tendency of the Sinhalese-dominated state. Sri Lanka did not have the experience of a national movement against the colonialism; instead, it had constitutional reform movement. This was necessarily a movement of Sinhalese, which addressed only the interests of the majority Sinhalese community, aimed at their domination over the minority Tamil-speaking community. This majoritarian tendency of the Sinhalese leadership led to the formation of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) that upheld the principle of ‘non-domination’ of the majority over the minority. Based on this principle, ACTC demanded a system of government that would ensure the ‘equal share to the minorities in the representation and in the government’ within the ‘unitary system’ of Sri Lanka. The response of the colonialists varied from one state to another according to their post-colonial interests in the particular state or region. While they positively responded to the extreme, complicated and controversial demand of the Muslims for a separate state in India, they rejected much lighter demand meant for the entire minorities within the unitary system of Sri Lanka, and empowered the rule of ‘majority democracy’. This empowerment encouraged successive post-colonial governments to practice exclusivist policies, which favoured a majoritarian state. The first post-independent government demonstrated this, by revoking the citizenship and voting rights of one million plantation Tamils. One section of the ACTC leadership foresaw this attitude as the indicator to the hidden agenda of assimilation of the Tamils into the majority Sinhalese and realised the urgency of ensuring protection of the identity of the Tamils in Sri Lanka.
They formed the Federal Party (FP) to resist being ruled. But, FP formulated widely acceptable, consociational alternative policy of federal system in place of the ACTC’s policy of equal share. That ‘autonomy’ was meant for the ‘traditional homeland of the Sri Lankan Tamils’ consisting of ‘northern and eastern provinces’ within the ‘framework of united Sri Lanka’. FP united the entire Sri Lankan Tamils under the federal slogan.

Political programme of the FP, basically sought to achieve a federal system, based on the Ahimsa principle of struggle. However, it never worked out any specific working programme to achieve the federal system. Instead, all its struggles were aimed at individual issues. The only remarkable movement was the language movement from 1956 to 1961. The strategy of mobilisation for federalism was largely confined to public meetings and occasional black flag protest against ministers, while they visited Tamil districts. Their speeches were aimed at awakening the people to realise the glory of their language, culture and the historical past. Tamils were asked to claim their rights to self-determination and to proclaim ‘Tamil nation’. Speeches always indirectly hinted at separate state as alternative to the federalism and aimed at arousing the emotions of the people, especially, the youth. Even a cursory glance of the terminologies and the language used by the leaders in the campaign for federalism would confuse as to whether the Party was mobilising support for federal system or for liberation struggle. Using such radical methods, FP became the authentic voice of the Tamils.

Five consecutive mandates of the Tamils for a federal system were repeatedly rejected by successive governments. On the contrary, they continued anti-Tamil policies aimed at weakening their sources of political, economic and cultural potentiality that provides validity to their claim and strength to their voices. Successive governments implemented these policies by enacting blatant anti-Tamils laws and practices. The Citizenship Bill of the first post-independence government axed almost half of the Tamil representation in the Parliament. While the Sri Lankan Tamil leadership was raising voice to restore the citizenship and voting rights of the plantation Tamils, successive governments not only rejected the demand but took an approach of burdening the FP with anti-Tamil issues by enacting new laws and practices. Government-sponsored Sinhalese colonisation in
Tamil districts was aimed at converting the Tamil areas into Sinhalese areas and reduce the representation of the Sri Lankan Tamils. The Official Language Act (Sinhala Only Act) was implemented to convert Sri Lanka into a Sinhalese state.

The satyagraha movement with spirited mass participation in protest against language law was responded by violent suppression, two nationwide anti-Tamil violence, disownment of an agreement for regional autonomy and imprisonment of Tamil leaders. Wherever Tamils tried to assert their rights, the state took measures to suppress their rights. The endurance of the Tamils reached its limits with introduction of the Republican Constitution that refused to incorporate the minimum demands put forward by the unified moderate Tamil leadership. An admission system for the university education based on race prevented a large part of the eligible Tamil students from entering higher education. The issue made the Tamils to lose trust in the Parliament and pushed them to demand for a separate state.

FP was disappointed with the government's attitude; ACTC was also in disarray. Both the parties needed a new face to further their politics and their leadership. Meanwhile, resentment of the youth pushed the Party to leave the Parliament and lead the extra-parliamentary struggle for a separate state. The ACTC and the FP took the advantage to form the TULF and assumed the Eelam resolution as goal of the Party. The emergence of TULF took a stretch of six long years. Hectic Eelam campaign was heralded by the TULF between the 1970-election and 1977-election. This duration itself indicates the intention of the TULF's adoption of Eelam demand.

Politics during this period witnessed a vociferous Eelam campaign. The campaign was aimed at inculcating the legitimacy of the demand of Eelam, its economic viability, and sustainability as a small state. Even though the Party officially declared the mode of struggle as Ahimsa, almost all the leaders subtly and openly agreed for an armed struggle giving the conviction that TULF would opt for such struggle if the situation demanded. TULF leaders branded all non-Eelamist politicians as weeds and suggested to remove them from the society as precondition to the struggle. The LTTE functioned as the military arm of the
TULF until 1980 and was loyally involved in political assassinations of the political opponents of the TULF. Most of them were identified by the Party as ‘weeds’ or ‘traitors’. The TULF-centric activities and the tenacity of the TULF campaign left no doubt on the availability of well planned programmes and on its capability to achieve such task.

TULF declared its goal as achieving democratic, socialist, casteless, and secular Eelam. The resolution directed the Action Committee of the TULF to formulate a ‘plan of action’ and launch without undue delay the struggle for winning the sovereignty and freedom of the Tamil Nation; it also called the youth to come forward fully in the sacred fight for freedom till the goal is reached. However, TULF failed to come out with the plan of action, instead, in its election manifesto of 1977, vaguely pledged that The Tamil-speaking representatives who get elected, while being members of the National State Assembly of Ceylon, will also form themselves into the ‘National Assembly of Tamil Eelam’ which would draft a Constitution for the State of Tamil Eelam and to establish the independence of the Tamil Eelam by bringing that Constitution into operation either by ‘peaceful means’ or by ‘direct action’ or ‘struggle’. However, this study found that this rhetoric was a mere vote-catching tactic of the TULF and no struggle had been led by the TULF. TULF built up a momentum for Eelam struggle that reached its peak during the 1977 election.

TULF obtained mandate in the 1977 election to establish a separate state. However, after winning the elections, TULF kept the Eelam goal on the backburner and confined itself to the parliamentary process. This backtracking attitude of the TULF caused loss of its support base in general and the youth base in particular. The reason for Amirthalingam’s reversal seems personal. He was very much scared of the attitude of Jayawardene and the State security forces. The same reason could be attributed to many other leaders. The anger of the people towards the TULF was that though it declared the Eelam issue to be a sacred one, soon it went back on its words and started playing politics with popular issues for the electoral interests of the Party. TULF rapidly lost the trust of the people it had enjoyed for decades.
The presence of militant organisations representing the interests of the Tamils shifts the focus of the community from the TULF. The growth of militant politics always shifts the balance against the moderate party, which, in due course, results in the latter’s decline. The failure of the TULF in addressing the Eelam demand frustrated the militants that virtually accelerated their activities. The effective way of addressing the goal by the militants gradually shifted the support from the TULF. The TULF, while carrying the Eelam slogan, was working for minimal decentralisation and the militants felt that TULF was weakening the momentum for Eelam. The TULF felt that the uncontrolled activities of the militants endangered their political efforts. Hence, the rift between the two widened gradually.

The TULF had claimed recognition as the sole Tamil party by branding other parties as ‘traitors’. This is how the LTTE also branded any voice of dissent as ‘traitor’ and successfully suppressed them. Ironically, it labeled the TULF too as ‘traitor’. India used the TULF as a political arm to negotiate with the government of Sri Lanka. After the Thimpu talks in June 1985, the role of the TULF and its claim as the sole representative of the Sri Lanka Tamils declined, as the militant groups became a part of the negotiation process. As the LTTE gained ground in securing legitimacy, the moderate party began losing its prominence. It shifted the balance of the conflict in favour of militancy.

Eelam War II erupted in June 1990, subsequent to the withdrawal of the IPKF which effectively curtailed the relationship of other parties with the people. However, the war created enormous problems for the people. To address these problems against the threat of the LTTE, it needed special abilities which the TULF did not possess. Therefore, even the militants who had dropped the Eelam cause and assumed the parliamentary path could continue to enjoy the people’s support. But the dissident groups opted to work along with the unpopular State forces; created resentment among the people and helped the survival of the TULF. Still, without the LTTE’s positive approach, TULF could not have been successful. Thus, it decided to be with the LTTE openly or secretly.
As conceived in the theoretical framework, blatant rejection of the Tamil aspirations by the State had an impact of producing different Tamil ethnic parties at different stage and pushed the TULF to advocate separation. Such demand of the TULF without adequate political and working programme created space for the emergence of militancy. Inactiveness of the TULF and the efficacy of the militants in addressing the Eelam cause led the militants to gain more support thus, negatively affecting the TULF. Strategies of the militants and the TULF vary; this contradiction also created a rift between the two. Therefore, militants pushed back the moderates. Due to the limitations of the TULF as a moderate party, it failed to further its policy and this vacuum was filled by the LTTE.

Majoritarian tendency may be based on ethnicity, language, religion, region, and caste; or, even a combination of these variables. Characteristically, majoritarianism challenges the identity of other groups, especially, in the new nation-states. In the colonised states, majoritarian tendency appears either in colonial era or in post-colonial era. The one that appears in the colonial era, may disappear in the post-colonial era due to change of political leaderships or change of political agenda. It may also continue or increase in tenacity after colonialism due to undetected power in disposal or magnitude of resistance from the minorities. The post-colonial appearance may occur due to going back on promises or agreements of the colonial era between the majority and the minority communities, or due to change of political forces in power.

Challenging the identity ranges from assimilation of such minorities through laws and practices to annihilation by force. Any resistance of such assimilation efforts would not be tolerated by such states. Sinhala-majority nationalist discourse, that emerged in the colonial era, was based upon the rejection of other communities; especially, it portrayed Tamils as ‘enemies’ and as a ‘threat’ to the Sinhalese. This type of nationalism caused xenophobia and ethnic hatred among Sinhalese. This masquerade of Sinhalese nationalism as Sri Lankan nationalism fostered a narrow definition of the Sri Lankan nation upon the exclusion of the Tamil-speaking community. Ironically, in the case of Sri Lanka, Sinhalese
nationalism emerged from the fear of the minority Tamil domination over the majority Sinhalese due to its cultural, linguistic, intellectual and, at times, political dominance historically. Therefore, Sinhalese nationalism developed with an inherent anti-Tamil content. Hence, the Sri Lankan State espoused majority nationalism as the base of its policies on the marginalisation or, sometimes, elimination of Tamils, and consistently pursued the assimilation policy. Sinhalese political leadership demonstrated the tendency from colonial period to the present, in increasing magnitude. That created Tamil parties which were furiously agitated and were prepared to adopt even non-violent means. Since the phenomena of the minority complex seems to be a permanent one as Sinhalese community is existing only in Sri Lanka and the Tamils are in various states, the firmness of such tendency seems to prevail until their fear of the Sinhalese evades. Examples of many African states shows that inter-ethnic relations built under colonialism were broken and ethnic parties emerged due to the disownment of the agreements of the leadership of the majority communities after colonialism. In the case of Spain, ETA of Basque was formed as a moderate party to assert the Basque identity. But the majoritarian tendency of the Franco rule pushed the ETA to advocate for separate Basque country even through violence means. The Sinn Fein in England protested against the domination of the Protestants, and demanded for separation. Likewise, Mukti Bahini of then East Pakistan emerged against the West Pakistan ruling elites that led to the separation of Pakistan. The experience of Sri Lanka and many other such examples proves the first hypothesis that ‘majoritarian tendency of a State not only produces ethnic parties but also drives them to advocate separatism’.

The post-colonial international system made secessionist struggle nearly impossible, as the state-to-state relations are based on interdependence. The UN Charter though accepts the right to self-determination for nations, in practice, it strengthens the states in various ways. No two states are ever willing to secede mutually, except for a few examples like Singapore and Malaysia, Czech and Slovak, and the former states of Soviet Union. Some other secessionist struggles were largely succeeded by militant struggle; that too with the external intervention, such as East Timor and former Yugoslavia. Some struggles are
prolonging for decades like Palestinian Liberation Organisation and Irish Revolution Army. No separatist struggles are won through peaceful means, without an external intervention or support. An external state intervention occurs either to ensure its strategic geo-political interest or to protect its ethnically affiliated community or even to assure both the interests. In such eventuality, either of the interest may get diluted or both the interests may be assured. This was largely determined by the strength of the leadership of the moderates by leading the struggle. If it had full command over the movement, it would have the voice to determine the desired solution. If the moderate leadership fails to have its hold over the struggle it would make the moderates dependent on the intervening country and would have to accept any solution offered by the intervening country.

Hence, if a moderate party resolves to lead a struggle for a separate state, it needs to have a comprehensive programme that could protect the party and its leadership and would exert constant pressure on the state from all relevant forces. Such a programme involves well-structured party organisation with relevant cells with specific tasks, constant mass mobilisation, national and international media relations and the campaign team to woo the international support. Implementation of well-formulated programme would sustain the struggle. Secessionist move would invite the repressive measures of the State. This would provoke the youth and create militancy. If the moderates are equipped with adequate programme to lead the movement successfully, the role of the militants would be minimal or subordinate, thus limiting the growth of the militants. Further, the moderate leadership would be in a position to control or influence the militants. In such situations, external intervention would further strengthen the moderates.

Inadequate working programmes would negatively affect the movement. On the one hand it would enhance the State to suppress the movement, and on the other, it would discredit the moderate leadership among the people. The vacuum created by the moderates would be filled by the militants. Militant struggles always have the content of adventurism; further, militant activities, though temporary, are prone to tangible impact. Such impacts give a psychological boost to the oppressed. Thus, militant struggle against a repressive State gains appreciation of the mass virtually threatening the existence of the moderates.
In the case of Sri Lanka, TULF resolved to achieve a separate Tamil Eelam as a solution to the ethnic question of the Sri Lankan Tamils. The TULF knew that the Eelam cause was the goal of all the Sri Lankan Tamils. Characteristically, repressive nature of the State, produced militancy. Yet, the TULF raised the hope of the people to such height that it believed that it could achieve Eelam. This campaign stopped with its victory in elections. Contrary to the Mukti Bahini of Bangladesh, after the elections, TULF sobered down. On the one hand, TULF leaders were threatened and tamed by the State, and on the other, they lost the credibility amongst the people. Militant activities gained support. The experience of the TULF proves the second hypothesis, ‘The secessionist policy of a moderate ethnic party lacking adequate working programme shall threaten its very existence while enhancing the popular support base to militancy’.

Militant struggles scare the State; in response, the magnitude of the State repression increases because, the State finds a justification to annihilate people in the name of wiping out terrorism. Such annihilation efforts tend to subdue basic human rights and humanitarian needs. This situation creates a climate conducive to external forces to intervene. Further, the ethnic movements seek external support—both material and moral—for their sustenance and survival. In such cases, the ethnic conflict in a society is determined not only by the factors within the country, but also by the external support. External support refers to the entire range of active and passive support that ethnic groups receive. Ethnic groups may receive support from neighboring countries with whom it shares cultural, linguistic of religious affinity. Alternatively, it may also seek support from countries that may have strategic or geo-political interests in the host country. The external factors also determine the level and intensity of the conflict, though the nature and intensity of such involvement varies. It may also patronise the militants for its own strategic reasons. This recognition and increasing influence makes them a part of any negotiations with the State. In such cases, the moderate party loses its prime position of being the sole spokesperson of the community.

The Indian involvement in Sri Lanka resulted from the State atrocities in response to the militant activities. Considering the authoritarian nature of the State and its hostile relationship with India, a sustainable solution to the Tamils and the
security interest of India on the Sri Lankan soil, necessitated the acceleration of militant activities to bring the Sri Lankan State to the table and to protect the people from the atrocities of the State forces. This prompted India to strengthen the militants. When militants psychologically and physically took over the parts of Tamil areas, they gained appreciation and legitimacy from the Tamils. They became the force to reckon with. When India made them party to the negotiation with the Sri Lankan State in 1985 at Thimpu, militants gained legitimacy by both the states. TULF became one among six parties in the negotiation on behalf of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. With the gaining of legitimacy by the militants, TULF lost its prominence that it had enjoyed for three decades since 1956. The experience of moderate party versus militants in the context of Sri Lankan Tamil politics proves the third hypothesis, 'greater the success of militants in securing legitimacy, the greater the chances of the moderate party losing its pre-eminence'.

Militants, by nature, stick to the goal, whereas moderates, by nature, compromise with the said goal. This basic attitude naturally reflects in their contradictory strategies. Strategy of the militants would aim at achieving the stipulated goal without bothering about the consequences, whereas, moderates mostly think in terms of practicability, thus changing the goal, according to the changing political realities. Moderates are bothered about the means, whereas end is the prime importance for militants. Militants risk life or even sacrifice life to achieve the goal; moderates generally adopt smooth paths, and thus expectations are not high. Militants rarely negotiate and compromise. Approach of the moderates is consensus and compromise. Therefore, in an escalated conflict while moderates engage in negotiations, in fact, the strength of the moderates is derived from the militant activities. On such occasions, militants perceive that the moderates sell-off their great sacrifices for low price. This contradictory approach causes a rift between the two. Militants are always assertive and have the tendency to overcome the hurdles on their path, thus, they take all the necessary measures to limit the functions of the moderates, including the method of physical elimination. Based on this argument, the fourth hypothesis, that 'the contradictory strategies of the moderates and militants tend to create rift between them in which the latter works for the former', is also proved.
In the case of Sri Lanka, while militants were for Eelam, TULF was for DDC (later changed to semi-federal like India). While militants were opposing elections as it would distract the people from main course, TULF advocated parallel function of both towards one goal. When India intervened, TULF strategy was to regain their position as leaders rather than finding solutions. Militants wanted to expose the Sri Lankan state and boycott its Parliament while TULF wanted to go to the Parliament. Going to the Parliament also meant condemning unlawful militant activities. Therefore, militants wanted moderates either to quit politics or function under their control.

III

The study of the TULF reveals that moderate parties have serious limitations in adopting a radical policy to establish a separate state. Such an immense task cannot be achieved within the limitations of a moderate party. A radical policy needs a radical working programme. A radical policy adopted by a moderate party using populist methods to mobilise people would not only isolate the party from people but also make the struggle meaningless.

It is very important to regulate the radical forces. Propping up militancy without any programme and organisational setup to accommodate the militants would not only turn against the moderates but also lead to their internal fight due to the absence of any regulating device. This would lead to the failure of the struggle.

In any conflict, means decides the end. When a party mobilises the people, it has to inculcate greater principles to adopt in the struggle. If the party teaches the people to hate and eliminate, it may not only boomerang, but also make a sick society.

If a party addresses the ethnic conflict with the expectation of external intervention, it needs to gain control over the struggle to influence the desired goal with the support of the intervening state. Otherwise, the party would be influenced by the intervening state.

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The study of the TULF shows that one of the major factors behind the emergence of militancy was the failure of the TULF. The conflict in Sri Lanka is an ongoing process and at present, LTTE leads the struggle. If the militant (LTTE) fails where would the Tamil politics lead to? Would the LTTE return to moderate politics? Would the LTTE accept democratic pluralism? Would such failure cause leadership problem? Or, would the LTTE control over the Tamils continue as unwanted armed group? Considering the ongoing political scenario, it seems that the LTTE struggle would not reach its goal. A study could also be taken up to understand the causes for the decline of the militant-turned political parties. Since these parties had almost a quarter-century history behind them and played different important roles in the process of the Eelam struggle, firmness of the majoritarianism, despite two decades-long armed struggle is also an issue which needs to be studied. Pre-1983 articulation of Tamil issue attracted sympathy towards the Tamil cause from the world. After the India–Sri Lanka Accord, the sympathy with Tamil cause rapidly declined. Contrarily, the known majoritarian state still maintains its goodwill while it continues to implement most of its anti-Tamil practices.