

Citizen of the world but rooted in Tamil ethos. (1999, September 19).
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Subramaniya Bharathy the great Tamil poet of early twentieth century when glorifying the Tamil language sang "Maravaaga Namakkul Palangkathaigal Pesei Payanillai, Thiramaana Pulamaenil Velinaattar Athai Vanakkam Seithal Vendum" (There is no use in talking about past matters among ourselves, if possessing merit it must be praised by foreigners) Although this was in reference to the merits of Tamil it also applies to Neelan Tiruchelvam and his Tamil detractors. While these so-called pseudo nationalist Tamils character-assassinate Tiruchelvam within the Tamils, International opinion that matters continues to respect and honour his life and work.

Contrary to the viewpoint that he worked against Tamil interests, Tiruchelvam was a man who had dedicated himself to the upliftment of the Tamils and the redressing of their grievances. Only unlike many of his abrasive and chauvinist kinsfolk he possessed a larger vision which realised that the ultimate well-being of the Sri Lankan Tamils was possible only in a united but not necessarily unitary Sri Lanka where all communities including that of his own could co-exist in a climate of peace, amity and harmony with justice, equality and dignity. Despite being maligned by extremist sections on both sides of the ethnic divide he strove relentlessly to achieve this goal until a misguided suicide bomber cut short a fruitful life on that fateful day.

It would indeed be a grave error for Tamils to feel that Tiruchelvam was not concerned about the Tamil plight or depict his principled issue-based support to the Kumaratunga regime's endeavour at Constitutional

reform as a collaborative act. He was a moderate in terms of his adherence to democratic principles and abhorrence of violence. A salient aspect of his political philosophy was illustrated during his speech in Parliament on June 15 this year, opposing Capital Punishment. He said "I would like to express my strong moral opposition to this measure.... we cannot glorify death, whether in the battlefield or otherwise. We on the other hand must celebrate life and are fiercely committed to protecting and securing the sanctity of life, which is the most fundamental value without which all other rights and freedoms become meaningless."

This principled opposition to the politics of death, displacement and despair certainly did not make him a devotee of what is now described as the dominant mode of the Tamil political struggle. By his courageous and honest refusal to pay lip service to the so called armed struggle Tiruchelvam placed himself in the unenviable position of being perceived by the proponents of Tamil virulence as an opponent of Tamil rights. Of course other Tamil elements with their own petty axes to grind promoted this perception and projected Neelan in a negative light.

The crux of the matter is that Tiruchelvam was certainly not a moderate when it came to Tamil rights. By character, training and inclination he chose Constitutional reform as the mode of achieving it. Ranging from the time he wrote a dissenting report to the conclusions of the Victor Tennekoon Commission on Devolution to his efforts at Constitution making in association with the People's Alliance Government he has never ever compromised on the funda-

mental rights of the Tamils. He was a Constitutionalist but like the founding fathers of the USA, a revolutionary constitutionalist. The Tamil pseudo-nationalists criticising the draft constitution as a "sell out of the Tamils" are yet to present a coherent and effective critique on those lines. The draft in its original form was a path breaking exercise amounting to quasi-federalism in the entire South Asian region.

On the other hand the mirror images of the Tamil hawks within the Sinhala community seem to have identified the Constitution in the making as a potential threat to Sinhala chauvinist hegemony in the Island and until the time of his death were bitterly critical of Tiruchelvam. A point lost on his Tamil detractors.

Unlike many prominent Tamils who seem wittingly or unwittingly oblivious to the tragic Tamil predicament Tiruchelvam was a man very much concerned about it. Since political hypocrisy was not one of his attributes Tiruchelvam realised that the establishment of Tamil Eelam was neither desirable nor attainable. The pursuit of such a mirage through a violent campaign could only result in long term misery for the Tamils he felt. The fact that the arena of conflict was primarily the Northern and Eastern Provinces meant hardship and suffering of the highest order for the Tamils. Besides he was very worried about the dispersal of the Tamil community from their areas of historic habitation and their consequent relocation to other parts of the world.

"It is this permanent migration that would be the most detrimental factor to the well-being of the Tamils in Sri Lanka" was a constant comment of his. A reduction

of numbers would result in diminished political importance he felt. In that context a letter by former Central Bank Governor N.U. Jayawardena that was published in a Colombo newspaper some time ago is relevant. Mr. Jayawardene in that pointed out two things. First he said that the Sri Lankan population would achieve zero growth by 2025 and stabilise itself. Second given the current rate of Sri Lankan outward migration its population percentage at that time would be only 1.9%. As such it would become a "Manageable minority" was NUJ's conclusion. The drastic long term effect of the conflict on the Sri Lankan Tamils is something that is either not realised or willfully ignored by the "Vocal Warriors" of the Tamil Eelam armed struggle. The question of whether the LTTE will win or lose the war becomes irrelevant in a situation where the Tamil population itself would become a feeble entity as it is already becoming. Those who proclaim triumphantly from their safe abodes overseas that the LTTE cannot be militarily defeated must ask themselves whether such a possibility falls within the objectives of their so called "enemy". The longer the conflict rages on the more the economy of the Tamil areas decline. Population decreases. In the final analysis the Tamil war that began with a bang will decay into a pathetic whimper. There was also the factor of geopolitical reality that was against the birth of a Tamil state on the Island. However much the sacrifice and valour of the Tigers there was just no way they could achieve their goal in the long run. For these reasons and more Neelan Tiruchelvam was among those actively in-

involved in trying to get the war suspended. He was also working diligently behind the scenes to get the government to resume talks with the LTTE. Tiruchelvam felt that only third party facilitation initially and subsequent mediation would succeed. This view that the war should end and talks with the Tigers should be initiated did not endear him to many sections of the government.

This coupled with his uncompromising stance on constitutional issues like changing the unitary structure of the state led to deteriorating relations between him and the upper echelons of the current regime. After his death many government figures are painting a glossy yet untrue picture of the situation that prevailed.

Tiruchelvam wanted talks between the government and LTTE for another reason too. He was realistic enough to know that the major player on the Tamil side was the LTTE. Because of their destructive capacity only the Tigers possessed bargaining clout that could extract maximum rights for the Tamils at the bargaining table he felt. Besides there was a humane aspect too. Though he did not agree with their aims or methods Tiruchelvam had a great deal of compassion and sympathy for the young cadres of the LTTE sacrificing themselves on the altar of Eelam. "It was a needless waste of young lives for an unwinnable cause" he felt. Although he has been demonised as a Tamil traitor working against the LTTE, history will record in the future that such charges were way off the mark. Although many Tamils are unable to see it now there will come a time when posterity will acknowledge and realise the value and importance of Neelan's current role.

The allegations made by Tamil sections against Tiruchelvam can be effectively countered only with the passage of time. In an environment where enlightened global opinion appreciates Tiruchelvam's positive role, it may seem incongruous to pay particular attention to the negative reaction among a section of the Tamils.

Nevertheless the fact remains that though the man was a citizen of the world he was rooted in the Tamil ethos. It would have been simple and indeed safer for him to ignore the Tamil plight and involve himself with other issues. Nevertheless he remained concerned and tried in every way possible to prescribe a political remedy that would cure the malady. It is therefore necessary that attempts be made to salvage his unfairly tarnished reputation among the Tamils. A start could be made perhaps by publishing the various Parliamentary Speeches he made and the memoranda he wrote on behalf of the Tamils. Also his role in Tamil politics should be placed in proper perspective.

Neelan Tiruchelvam's loss is irreplaceable and his life cannot be redeemed. But what can be done is to redeem his tarnished name among sections of the Tamil people. The bard of Avon in his immortal classic dramatises the eloquent oratory of Mark Anthony. Though Brutus and his cohorts had influenced public opinion to revile Julius Caesar, Anthony reverses the situation through addressing the people in that famous oration which begins: "friends, Romans, Countrymen ...". Likewise the good name of Neelan has to be salvaged and restored for posterity. This is the least that can be done for this gentle and noble soul who was indeed goodness personified while living.