

Loss of the Tamil Homeland

Identifying issues and creating strategies to Preserve Tamil Land

**2021 March 20th at 12.30 pm London Time; 6 pm Colombo Time and 8.30 am
Toronto Time**

Transcription of Speech by Hon. R. Sampanthan

I wish to thank Mr. Justice Wigneswaran and the other organizers of this event for giving me an opportunity to be able to say a few words on this occasion dealing with land grab in the North-Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka which perhaps have been the most controversial issue in the country since the country was given independence in 1948.

Actually about the time the country had been given independence and thereafter, successive governments of Sri Lanka had pursued a policy of colonizing the North East of Sri Lanka particularly Eastern Province by which I mean developing new irrigation schemes bringing under irrigation more land and settling on that land Sinhalese citizens from the other parts of the country so as to change the demographic composition of the Eastern Province in particular.

I might just mention some figures to demonstrate how significant the Island wide increase in the Sinhalese population is. From 1948 when the country gained independence till 1981 the last available census the increase was 238% or 2 and half times. In the same period, the Sinhalese population in the Eastern Province increased by 883% or 9 times over. 2 1/2 times in the whole country, 9 times in the Eastern Province. In the Trincomalee district, the Sinhalese population increased by 500% or 5 times over. In the Amparai district, the Sinhalese population increased by 1200%, 12 times over. This shows the extent to which colonization took place. Tamil political leadership took note of this situation and our leader the late Mr SJV Chelvanayakam conducted negotiations with SWRD Bandaranaike Prime Minister of Sri Lanka and there was the Bandaranaike -Chelvanayakam Pact in 1957. Under that pact, Regional Councils were to be created one for the Northern Province, two or more for the Eastern Province because there were three communities in the Eastern Province. These Regional Councils were given the power to amalgamate beyond provincial boundaries and they were given the power to select their own colonization schemes and select the persons who will work under those particular schemes. In other words, control of State land in terms of the arrangement was brought under the Regional Councils. Unfortunately, that pact was not implemented.

Subsequently, in 1965 there was the Dudley Senanayake - Chelvanayakam Pact in terms of which priorities were laid down for land alienation in the North Eastern Provinces. The first priority was landless persons in the constituency concerned, the second priority was landless Tamil speaking persons in the Northern and Eastern Provinces and the third priority was for the landless persons from the rest of the country, but priority to be given to Tamil citizens from the rest of the country. That pact was not implemented, and colonization went ahead.

Then there was the Indo Sri Lanka Agreement on 29th July 1987 signed between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and President JR Jayewardene in terms of which it was recognized and accepted that Sri Lanka was a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and plural society comprising of Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims and that each one of these groups, each one of these ethnicities had a distinct identity which shall be preserved and nurtured and that the Northern and Eastern Provinces have been the areas of historical habitation of the Tamil speaking people and should therefore form one unit of devolution. This was the agreement that was arrived in 1987 under the Indo Sri Lanka Agreement.

So though the government continued with the program of colonization, settling in the North East particularly Eastern Province Sinhala people brought in from elsewhere, yet the government was compelled to accept that the Tamil speaking people had a legitimate concern in the future of the North and the East and they were territorially identified as Tamil linguistic territories. Apart from bringing Sinhalese people, they demarked new electorates, new government divisions and new logistical divisions. Amparai electorate came into being in 1960 March. That was the first time a Sinhalese Member of Parliament from Eastern Province came into Parliament. Thereafter we have now 3 to 4 Members of Parliament being elected from Amparai in the Eastern Province. Trincomalee electorate comprising of the Trincomalee district and Seruwila came into being for the first time in 1977. Fortunately, we were able to restrict membership to one person.

New administrative districts were created, new DS divisions were created, new Grama Sevaka divisions were created. After fulfilling the settlement of Sinhalese people in a large area, a new Division was carved out including that area with a lot of undeveloped, unoccupied land to enable the government to pursue the policy of Sinhalese settlements in the Eastern Province. It happened in the Amparai District in a big way, it happened in the Trincomalee District in a big way. So, the government had been working on the policy of settling Sinhalese people in new DS and GS Divisions in such a manner so as to increase the Sinhalese population, restrict the influence and power of the Tamil speaking people and enable the Sinhalese people to do whatever they

wanted in Tamil speaking areas which were historically inhabited by the Tamil speaking people.

There has been a long-time demand for the amalgamation of the North and the East and the merger of the North and the East as one Province for the purpose of power-sharing and devolution. But efforts were made to bifurcate this linguistic continuity between the North and the East. People were settled in the border areas in a place called Manalaaru, which was thereafter called Weli Oya to enable the bifurcation- the division of linguistic continuity. Despite all these things happening over a long period of time, even today the majority of the people in every single District in the North and the East, in Jaffna, in Kilinochchi, in Mannar, in Vavuniya, in Mullaitivu, in Trincomalee, in Batticaloa and in Amparai, - the majority of people in the Districts are Tamil speaking. People in the Northern Province and Eastern Province and in every District in the North and the East, the majority are Tamil speaking.

Currently, they are engaged in Forest Department actions, Wildlife Department actions and Archaeological Department actions. Archaeological departments are there to save ancient monuments. But we have a Special Task Force set up to preserve archaeological monuments under a pan Sinhala Task Force, comprising of Buddhist monks who are placed as heads to preserve archaeological monuments in the Eastern Province. Monuments which have been there from the time when the country had been given independence are now thought to be in need of preservation!

People are brought to be settled in those areas in such a way that the Sinhalese population are set to increase. The Forest Department is occupying land from which our people were evicted and they have ensured they would not return. The Forest Department should deal with Forests. But their Department acquires land from people who possess documents, permits to prove they have been in possession of all those lands and have cultivated and lived on those lands for generations.

Wildlife Department had been claiming large extent of lands. Wildlife sanctuaries had been enlarged with lands which were earlier occupied and cultivated by Tamil speaking people.

Archaeological Department instead of saving monuments they are taking over pasture lands from Tamil people in the North and the East and are preventing people from grazing their cattle in those pasture lands.

So all in all there has been a deliberate plan being pursued by the government to take over land and convert the Eastern Province into a majority Sinhalese area. They have not yet been successful as our people have lived in these lands for a long, long time. They have deep-roots in these lands. They have possessed these lands for generations

and centuries and every District in both North and the East, still continues to be a Tamil speaking majority District.

It is time that very firm action must be taken and that this matter be brought forward to the knowledge of everyone in this country. **We are not against the Sinhalese People.** We are not saying Sinhalese people should not receive land in the Eastern Province or the Northern Province but it must not be done in such a way as to deliberately convert those areas which have been traditionally and historically Tamil speaking areas into majority Sinhalese speaking areas. That is our position. So we urge everyone concerned with justice and equality and unity and well being and reconciliation amongst the different communities to join together to resist this programme.

Violence was unleashed against the Tamil people, people were killed, people were injured, people were chased away. 50% of the Tamil population in this country had to move overseas to live abroad. In that position, they're trying to further weaken our position by sending Sinhalese into areas occupied by Tamils. In this instance, I would like to appeal to everyone to contribute their best efforts to the achievement of a very just cause. Thank you.

Hon' R.Sambanthan, M.P.