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Tamils of Malaysia and the Second World War

S. NAGARAJAN

In 1940 Indians constituted about 14 percent of the Malayan population. Of these Indians nearly 80 percent of them were Tamils. As early as 1931 Indian population in Malaya was 621,847. During Japanese invasion of Malaysia Indian population was about 625,000. After the war Tamil population declined to 599,616 in 1947.

At the time of Japanese occupation of Malaya, Indians were not permitted to migrate to India by the British. There was racial discrimination. Only the Europeans were permitted to evacuate. In fact on 24 December 1941 when the Government of India asked the Malayan Government what assistance was required from India in the evacuation of Indian population of Malaya, they were told none was required. And on 14 January 1942 the Colonial Secretary of Singapore asked from India ships. Only about 5000 Indians were able to return to India on military transport vessels. Many Tamil Chettiyars and other businessmen left, entrusting their establishments to agents and nominees. And all the rest of Malaya's 625,000 Indians came under Japanese rule. In addition 70,000 Indian troops who had been sent to defend Malaysia were also overwhelmed. And only a few managed to escape.

As a result of the impact of the war the daily routine on the estates where the Indian labourers were employed was affected. This was because when the British armed forces withdrew, all European personnel in Government service and in the private sector were evacuated. This left the

plantations without management and dislocated their entire operation. The Japanese attempted to restart operations but they succeeded only in some estates. This left large numbers of Tamil labourers unemployed. There was only irregular and inadequate employment opportunities. Inadequate pay rates, short rations, escalating inflation, under nourishment multiplied their sorrow. Generally the Tamils were obliged to move about the country to seek work, to bargain intensely over wage rates and rations and to compete with other races in the employment market. This environment brought Tamil clerical and administrative classes into closer contact with Tamil labourers than before. Hence this led to the reduction of the former barrier of status and function among the Tamils. In fact as a result of this new changed experience some Indian clerks began to develop strong commitments to leadership of movement for the uplift of Indian labourers. And in turn Indian labourers gained increased political and social awareness, especially due to their contact with the better educated groups. Further as a result of the disruption of racially compartmentalised employment system of the British and increased mobility of Tamil labourers, closer contact between the Chinese and Tamil labourers was established. This led to the increasing influence of communist ideas as well as the emergence of workers' class co-operation.

This new environment was also due to the Tamil labourers' involvement in the Indian national movement. This Indian national movement in Malaya was closely linked with the Japanese Pan-Asianism ideology. Pan Asianism blessed the Indians to use any weapon to get rid of British colonialism. When the countries of Southeast Asia came under its sway Japan set about organising Indian leaders of these countries to spearhead the Pan-Asianism Movement. This earliest Malaysian Tamil leader who was involved with this movement was Mr.K.A.Nilakandha Ayer, the Secretary of the C.I.A.M. who attended the conferences arranged by Japan

in Japan and Bangkok along with their leader Rash Behari Bose. At these conferences broad agreement was reached on marshalling support among Indian communities of South East Asia for a united nationalist effort to liberate India with Japanese military assistance. It was clear from the outset Malaya would be the centre of the Movement, it was geographically close to India, it had a large Indian population, its leaders entered the movement with enthusiasm from the outset and most important of all units of the British Indian army stationed in Malaya had surrendered and would form the nucleus of the Indian National Army that was to be formed. The Indian Independence League was the political arm of the movement with Rash Behari Bose as its leader. On its Executive Committee of five was a Tamil, N.Raghavan, the president of C.I.A.M. and a Malayan Indian Nationalist. The popularity of this movement increased vastly after Subhash Chandra Bose took command of the situation in July 1943 at Singapore.

Subhash Chandra Bose was made president of the Independence League and the Commander-in-Chief of INA (Indian National Army). A Provisional Government of Free India (Azad Hind) was declared in October 1943 with Bose as Prime Minister. A few Malayan Indian leaders were given offices in this government. The Azad Hind Government declared war on Britain and America. It was recognised by Japan, Germany and Italy and six other countries. The slogan Chalo Delhi (let us go to Delhi) became popular.

Indian Independence League organisations were established in all leading centres in Southeast Asia to recruit men and collect fund. Men and money poured into the independence movement on an unprecedented scale from all over Southeast Asia, particularly from Malaya, the head quarters of the Movement. Although it is true some of the vounteers joined the Independence Movement for safety, better relations or for want of

something better to do, the majority appeared to have been genuinely inspired and patriotic. They regarded themselves as the vanguard of the liberation movement and Subhash Chandra Bose as the veritable Messiah who had come to lead them with Japanese help to achieve India's independence. Many regiments of the Indian National Army fought bravely and with distinction on the Burma Front but their success was short lived. The whole Independence Movement collapsed following the surrender of the Indian National Army and the Japanese and the death of Subhash Chandra Bose in 1945.

Short lived though the Indian Independence Movement was in Malaya and the rest of Southeast Asia, its repercussions were nevertheless farreaching in both India and Malaya. In Malaya the Independence Movement, particularly as manifested in the Indian National Army and its achievements fired the imagination of Indians and wrought a tremendous psychological revolution in their minds. Down to the humblest labourer they felt confident of themselves and proud of being Indians.

Formerly docile, subordinated group of Indians schooled to take order and work to rule were trained for positive leadership roles. The English educated clerks often became officers. Many of the literate labourers became NCOs. Even the ordinary ranks showed a new pride and independence. The camps were filled with a ferment of ideas deriving not merely from the teaching of nationalist and revolutionary history or the inculcation of anti-imperialistic attitudes but also from the spontaneous exchange of views about all sorts of political ideas from Dravidianism to socialism and communism.

Thus the Japanese occupation was not without its advantage. To the Indians IIL and INA left some everlasting features on their community. The leadership hitherto vested on English educated urban professional mercantile classes saw diversification to include the plantation and rural

people like the Tamil teachers and Kanganys. The gap between rural and urban sectors considerably narrowed. A fresh society imbibing rigorous discipline of military life and firm loyalty was taking shape.

Politics was carried over to the plantation. The experience gained through organising meetings and raising funds later enhanced in conducting effective trade unions. In fact the anti-Western character of nationalist propaganda was to affect the attitude of the labourer towards the European boss when he returned. He had previously stood in awe of him and dared not cross his path. His wrath against established authority had been vented on the lesser representatives of power such as Kanganys, clerks and conductors. Instances of his defiance of the European planter were extremely rare. All this changed with the regeneration of labourers. The younger generation of labourers in particular now stood up to the manager. The old paternalistic control could no longer be exercised. This accounts for the transitional period of chaos and disorder on the plantation between the decline of the paternalism of the manager and the rise of responsible leaders from among the labourers.

Put succinctly, for the first time there was an awakening of social and political consciousness among all races. The Indians became more politically aware because of their involvement in the INA, IIL, which generated leadership qualities amongst Indians at every level. The strong and overpowering nature of Indian nationalist ideology and the struggle to achieve its aims brought these disparate groups together. After the war it was clearly observable that Indians of all classes and groups were emotionally drawn towards each other. Out of this growing Pan-Indian identification it became possible to bring Indians effectively together in one all embracing political organisation.

Thus the Second World War created a transformed group of Indians who were suddenly conscious of their organisational power. They learnt to

defend their interests because of their involvement in the INA and IIL. Earlier they were law abiding and adhered to Gandhian concept of Non-violence.

The Japanese, as a side effect, also encouraged the development of Tamil language. For example IIL from its Singapore headquarters printed three in Tamil, namely, *Cutantara Intiya* (a daily), *Cutantirotayam* (weekly) and *Yuva Paratam* (weekly). Even *Tamil Necan* bore the stamp of publication of IIL headquarters on its mast head. It announced the death of Subhash Chandra Bose on 25 August 1945 (Bose died on 19 August 1945) and from the next day onwards it abandoned its IIL imprint. It appears that almost a dozen more like *Jeya Paratam*, *Jintapet* from Penang, *Putu Ulakam*, *Illankatir* and *Illampirai* from Ipoh, *Iti Mulakkam*, *Kampar*, *Utayacuriyan* from Jaiping, *Jeyamani* and *Islamiya Illainar* from Kuala Lumpur, *Cirampam Ceiti* and *Cirampam Kejak* from Seremban were circulated during the Japanese days. Thus one could imagine not only a busy journalistic activity but also the importance accorded to Tamil language during Japanese occupation.

Only three Tamil papers of IIL are traced now. They are *Cutantara Intiya*, *Cutantirotayam* and *Yuva Paratam*. The theme of the short stories was independence of Mother India. "We wish to achieve the target of Indian independence with the assistance of the Japanese. The Indians would fight to the last blood for this noble aim. Whoever aids to liberate our country is regarded as a friend, while others are considered as foes" . Thus wrote the editor of *Cutantara Intiya* daily on 24 March 1942. News were geared towards this ideal. The IIL activities, INA performance, the defeat of Anglo-US alliance partners were reported at great length. The Tamil daily also carried lessons on Japanese language. After a series of such lessons it suddenly published two pages of news in Japanese characters on 10 June 1942. Concurrently reports on INC, the 8th August uprisings of

1942, biography of outstanding leaders saturated the reading public.

IIL simultaneously started the weekly *Cutantirotayam*. "Like the appetite is ruined by the same type of food likewise one is grown weary of the same type of news" . Contended the weekly in its first edition on 14 September 1942. Stories, essays, dramas of literary merit pervaded its pages. Yet the entertainment aspect could not be totally adhered to and literature of the day essentially remained as a vehicle of propaganda.

In *Cutantara Intiya* during 15 months period only two stories are found. And both were adopted from the Japanese. They are meant for children to inculcate morality and virtue. *Momo Taro*, a famous Nippon short story was published on 16 May 1942 in Saturday special issue. It speaks of a strange child who with mighty prowess subdues a giant demon and returns with a heap of glittering stones. It was published to coincide with the Children's Day in Japan, observed annually on 5th May wherein the portrait of Momo Taro would be carried in a procession. Another fantasy narrates the gratitude of a faithful dog to its old master. After its death its ash was sprinkled over a cherry garden of a prince. The miraculous power of the ash refooliates the orchard, hence the prince in utter happiness bestows an award to the old man. It appeared on 23 May 1942. Its Tamil title was *Puspam Malarvikkum Perunkila Vanarin Makkutuvam*.

Interest in Indian classical music and dance which surfaced from the middle of 1930s among some urban middle class Indians became more intensified after the Japanese occupation whereby some Indian parents even sent their children to South India and Ceylon to learn Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam.

During the Second World War Tamils living in Indonesia had to undergo ordeals. British troops, defeated by the Japanese were kept at Medan. A majority of these British troops were Indians. Both these Indian soldiers and the Tamils living in Medan joined Subhash Chandra Bose's army, INA

and fought on the Burmese front. Many of them did not return to Medan but stayed permanently in Malaya or Singapore.

In 1930 there were 30,000 Indians in Indonesia, a majority of them were Tamils. Of those 48.5 percent lived in Sumatra (Medan). Rich Tamils and businessmen went back to India during the Second World War. Further since plantations were affected, Tamil labourers of the plantations migrated to and settled in Medan and other cities. Towards the end of the Second World War 800 Allied Forces landed in Medan. It was during that time Indonesia was proclaiming independence. And since the majority of these Allied troops were Indian soldiers freedom loving Indonesians spread the rumour that India had invaded Indonesia. Angry Indonesians began to burn Indian homes, killed their cattle and those who opposed them were killed. And the Tamils were driven out. Hence the Tamils went and settled in places where there was the protection of the Dutch authorities. Anglo-Indian troops too, helped them.

Dr. Emmanuel Divien, Madras University, sent me the following information. "There were quite a large number of Tamils from Pondicherry residing in Indochina. During the Japanese occupation they were well treated. I have this information from my close relatives". Thus the Japanese, it can be concluded, generally treated well the Tamils of Southeast Asia. And only those who were anti-Japanese were naturally punished.

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Notes; (1) English translation of Tamil Journals

Cutantara Intiya	= Independent India
Cutantirotayam	= Dawn of Freedom
Yuva Paratam	= Bharat Youth
Tamil Necan	= Tamil Friend
Jeya Paratam	= Victorious Bharat
Jintapet	=

Putu Ulakam	= New World
Illankatir	= Rising Rays
Illampirai	= Rising Moon
Iti Mulakkam	= Thunder Voice
Kampar	= <i>Kambar</i>
Utaya Curiyan	= Rising Sun
Jeyamani	= Victory Bell
Islamiya Illainar	= Youth of Islam
Cirampam Ceiti	= Seremban News
Cirampam Kejak	=
(2) Abbreviation	
CIAM	=Central Indian Association of Malaya
INC	=Indian National Congress

ここに紹介するナガラージャン氏の2つの報告は、1993年11月4日に大阪外国語大学アジア研究会の会合で読まれたものである。

ナガラージャン教授は、東南アジア史、とくに東南アジアにおけるタミル文化の受容に関心を持ち、現在は、インドのタミル大学在外タミル研究学科長および発展タミル学部長の職にある。

この報告では、タミル語資料の活用を通して、1942年のインド人のビルマ脱出の悲劇などこれまであまり知られなかった第二次世界大戦期の事実が明るみに出されている。大戦期の日本の軍事政策についての解釈には問題が残されているが、著者が主張する日本の「親インド的」「親タミル的」とみられる態度の背景についてはより広い視野から検討されなければならない。

この報告のほか、ナガラージャン教授は、10月29日に、大阪外国語大学で、「タミル人の世界文化への貢献」と題する講演を行ない、11月6日には、南アジア研究会（大阪、なにわ会館）で、「南インドのタミル人と第二次世界大戦」「スリランカのタミル人と第二次世界大戦」と題する2つの報告を発表している。

桑 島 昭