

Voice of Shakthi - Thursday 11 May 2000

Last Sunday "Shakthi" completed two years on air. This, we believe, is an appropriate time to look back at the path we have travelled and the way ahead.

There are some major differences between "Shakthi" and other Sinhala radio programs in Melbourne. It is not a habit with us to start our programs by paying homage to all religions before going on to propagate war and violence denounced by these very same faiths. The "Shakthi" crew is not stratified into executives and their orderlies. We do not invite pathetic personalities of colossal ignorance to provide economic analyses and talks on global rationalization. We ask Sisira Jayasuriya to comment on economics because his expertise is acknowledged internationally; not because he wants to boost his profile in the community. We do not display particular enthusiasm for publicising our names, simply because "Shakthi" is not about propping up and promoting personalities. It is not because we are afraid of anybody. Those who should know us, know us very well indeed.

However, the uniqueness of "Shakthi" lies in its vehement opposition to Sinhala and Tamil extremism. By extremism we mean the extreme stances adopted by sections of the Sinhala and Tamil communities regarding the ethnic war in Sri Lanka. The Sinhala extremists are today calling for a continuation of the war against the LTTE because, according to them, there is no ethnic problem. There is a terrorist problem which needs to be handled militarily and militarily alone. The Sri Lankan Constitution, they claim, provides equal rights to all citizens and they try to marshal an impressive array of statistics to prove that minorities, particularly Tamils, enjoy educational and professional opportunities that exceed the proportional representation in the population. All this, it seems, is incontrovertible evidence that the LTTE's war is nothing but a terrorist war.

But what these people have ignored is that the riots in July 1983 occurred at a time when this wonderful Constitution was in place and when all these statistics were valid. Where was the Constitution when Sinhala "goondas" paraded the streets, burning, looting and killing while the security forces looked on? For several days, it seemed, not only the Constitution, but even the normal laws of the land had been suspended. Why? Because majority/minority relationships in Sri Lanka are not determined by the Constitution but by Sinhala chauvinism which expects the minorities to accept the primacy of the Sinhalese or suffer the consequences.

According to this unwritten law, all minorities are strangers living

on the land of the Sinhala Buddhists who require the goodwill and protection of the Sinhala Buddhists to live in peace. That chauvinistic attitude was given its most sinister expression in 1983 when anger at the killing of 17 policemen by the LTTE was vented on the Tamils in the South, who were seen to have "abused" the goodwill of the majority.

No Sinhalese would want to live as a minority under such circumstances and no Sinhalese has the right to ask Tamils or any other minority to do so either.

But we wonder if attitudes have changed even now. The so-called war for peace, supposedly fought to liberate the Tamils, is yet to see a single military operation with a decent Tamil name. When Jaffna was taken from the Tigers in 1995 and they bulldozed the Tiger cemetery, calling it a propaganda tool, these pompous chauvinists did not have the decency to consider whether the parents of those dead Tigers would have been prepared to accept this logic.

Today there is widespread expectation that Tamils in the North and the Vanni should accept the immeasurable hardship imposed by the war as a recurring evil in a righteous war against terrorism, but all the bombs in the South is the work of terrorists. We still remember the words of a Sinhala radio broadcaster in Melbourne after 27 civilians were killed by an Air Force bomb in Mullativu and the Tigers massacred civilians in Amparai in retaliation.

The bomb, the broadcaster said, was dropped by accident and the Tigers had over-reacted by massacring Sinhala civilians. These are the same people who were ready to take the entire Australian nation to task when Darryl Hair no-balled Muralitharan. And these are the same people who have the audacity to say that Tamils have no problems.

But as we mentioned earlier, we are also against Tamil extremism. By this we mean the stance taken by some people that there is no solution short of Tamil Eelam. It must be accepted that the majority of Tamils are sympathetic towards the LTTE. Because the LTTE has made them walk with heads held high, because Tiger kids running around in Bata slippers had given Sinhala chauvinism an answer they will never forget, this does not mean that they approve everything that the LTTE does or that Tamil Eelam is the only answer; their support is determined largely by the lack of a viable alternative as well.

Many of them would like to live in Sri Lanka, only if it is possible to do so without feeling that they need the protection of the majority. No Sri Lankan government has been able to tap into that desire because no government has been able to offer a solution free of

Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism. Under such circumstances, Tamil support for the LTTE is not extremism. It is self-determination.

However, there is a form of Tamil extremism. That is the attitude of many LTTE spokespersons in the West. These people who have identified themselves completely with the LTTE, consider the Tigers to be infallible and having only the welfare of the Tamils at heart. Their final objective is not the winning of Tamil rights but the establishment of an Eelam at any cost.

Eelam is little more than a trophy to them, certainly not a country they want to live in. Having tasted somewhat of a democratic style of government in the West, they will never consider living under Velupillai Prabhakaran, except for short trips and holidays. Eelam for them would be for display, to be proud of as Tamils living in the West. For that narrow objective, they are willing to support the LTTE without conditions, without a thought to the helpless people in the North who are dying for that goal, not their own children.

Living in their mansions, they are only too eager to claim the victories achieved with such tremendous sacrifice. We cannot oppose the Tamil people's struggle for dignity. But we can and we will spurn the hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness of sections of the Tamil lobby with the contempt it deserves.

This is the stance taken by "Shakthi" in the past and it is the stance we will take in the future. We are nobody's fools and we cannot be bought by anyone. The so-called patriots in the Sinhala community and the LTTE lobby may scorn us for our beliefs. But our commitment lies in the strength of our convictions. We, like many Sri Lankans, want to see a country where all people live in peace and dignity, not on the whims and fancies of racists.