

MAHATMA GANDHI'S TECHNIQUE OF SATYAGRAHA AND POLITICAL CHANGE: A CASE STUDY OF THE PRAYER CAMPAIGN OF THE CEYLON WORKERS CONGRESS OF SRI LANKA IN 1986.

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1. Introduction

After the 1977 General Elections in Sri Lanka, the Trade Union cum Political Party representing the interests of the plantation workers of Indian origin, namely, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) joined the United National Party (UNP) Government as a Junior Partner and its leader Sowmiamurthy Thondaman was appointed a Minister. While serving as Minister of Rural Industries, Sowmiamurthy Thondaman in his capacity as the President of the CWC organized a campaign of non-violent resistance in 1986 to press the Government to grant citizenship to a section of the "stateless" persons in Sri Lanka. The Government of Sri Lanka responded favourably to the prayer campaign and passed an Act in Parliament in January 1986 to grant citizenship to 94,000 "stateless persons" in Sri Lanka.

The nature of the campaign organised by the CWC was non-violent and based on the Gandhian concept of moral resistance. Believers in moral resistance are convinced that the evil should be resisted, but only by peaceful and moral means. The motive is to convert the opponent and make him one's willing ally and friend. It is based on the idea that the moral appeal to the heart and conscience is, in the case of human beings, more effective than an appeal based on threat of bodily pain or violence.

In Sri Lankan politics, political strikes, hartals and satyagraha campaigns are usually non-violent and accepted forms of dissent. Between 1956 and 1965 several non-violent sit-down protest demonstrations were held by the supporters and opponents of the Sinhala Only Act passed by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike government in 1956. Former President of Sri Lanka J. R. Jeyawardene when serving as the Leader of the Opposition from 1970 - 1977 adopted the non-violent action or what he called *satyagriya* as a political weapon to oppose the actions of the government. For example, he organised a sit down protest demonstration at

Attanagalla when he and his party supporters were stopped by some people on his way to hold a rally in that electorate.

Although the UNP won with 5/6th majority in the 1977 General Elections and formed a government in 1977, it included CWC in order to get the support of the plantation workers and also in order to have stability in the economic front. Nevertheless, the CWC organised a prayer campaign in January 1987. This campaign offers an example of a successful application of non-violent resistance in the politics of Sri Lanka,

In this paper an attempt will be made to examine the nature of the CWC prayer campaign in the background of the Gandhian concept of *satyagraha*. This paper is directed towards finding an answer to whether the government's decision to grant citizenship was influenced purely by the prayer campaign or by the particular political situation that prevailed in the country at the time.

II. Gandhian Political Thought

In Gandhi's political teachings as in any system of political thought, one does not fail to find the two essential requirements of a political thought, namely,

(i) "reflection upon the ends of political action,

and

(ii) the means of achieving them"¹.

R. N. Iyar has clearly reflected this in the following terms:

Gandhi presents us with a Problem for he had both a vision of the radical transformation of the existing social order and political system and, at the same time a concern to evolve a revolutionary technique of political action and social change...²

As we are interested in Gandhi's technique of political action it is relevant here to examine Gandhi's technique of *satyagraha*:

Gandhi's Technique of Satyagraha

Gandhi's main contribution to the philosophy of politics lies in the technique of *satyagraha* which he had evolved in the course of his experiments with truth. The literal meaning of the term *satyagraha* is "clinging to truth". The word

satya (truth) implies love and *graha* (firmness) means force. As for Gandhi, "truth being god", the term accordingly means, "the way of life of one who holds steadfastly to god and dedicates his life to him."³ The attainment of truth can only be achieved by love and non-violence. Here, non-violence serves as a weapon in the hands of a *satyagrahi*. In an ordinary sense, *satyagraha* means, resistance of evil through the force of the soul.

In a narrow sense *satyagraha* can take many forms. The prime intention of such a *satyagraha* is to convert the opponent and make him realize the righteousness of the one who undertakes the *satyagraha* by inflicting sufferings on himself. Non-cooperation is one of the many forms *satyagraha* may take. Here non-cooperation is not with the one who does evil, but with his evil deeds. Fasting is another form of *satyagraha* and it should not be undertaken for any selfish motives. On the contrary, it must be performed for a just cause.

In the political arena, *satyagraha* takes the form of civil disobedience. Gandhi became known to the world through his civil disobedience movement in South Africa and India. "It is called 'civil' because it is non-violent resistance by people who are ordinarily law abiding citizens..."⁴ Civil disobedience movements should be launched only when negotiations and the constitutional methods fail to bring a settlement with the government. They must be mass-based and conducted strictly on non-violent principles. A constructive programme must also accompany the civil disobedience movement in the form of economic assistance to the people. K. Sridharni and J. V. Bondurant have analysed in a systematic and comprehensive manner the necessary requirements for *satyagraha* and civil disobedience movements. For instance Sridharni observed that,

satyagraha, as an organized mass action presupposes that the community concerned has a grievance which practically every member of that community feels. This grievance should be of such large proportions that it could be transformed in its positive side into a "cause" rightfully claiming sacrifice and suffering from the community on its behalf"⁵

J. V. Bondurant presents the steps to be followed in a *satyagraha* campaign as follows:

- (1) Negotiations and arbitration.
- (2) Preparation of the group for direct action.
- (3) Agitation.
- (4) Issuing of an ultimatum.

- (5) Economic boycott and forms of violence.
- (6) Non - cooperation.
- (7) Civil Disobedience.
- (8) Usurping of the functions of government.
- (9) Parâllel government.⁶

Bondurant explained the conflicting situation and the application of *satyagraha* in dialectical terms. The first thing for any *satyagrahi* is to understand the character and the circumstances of a conflicting situation. The immediate objective of a *satyagraha* is to create a new circumstance in which the opposing parties would find a satisfactory solution to their conflict. Bondurant argued that "this is in Hegelian terms, an aiming of at a synthesis out of the conflict of thesis and antithesis"⁷ In essence, *satyagraha* emphasizes that conflicts can be handled by peaceful means in which the opposing parties respect each others moral values to find a satisfactory solution to their conflict without recourse to violence.

Critics of Gandhian political thought have pointed out some important weaknesses in it. Firstly, the inconsistencies of Gandhi's teachings. Gandhi himself admitted this when he said,

At the time of writing I never think of what I have said before. My aim is not to be consistent with my previous statements on a given question, but to be consistent with truth as it may present itself to me at a given moment.⁸

Secondly, his ideas of decentralization on the basis of village communities have been criticised as irrelevant to a modern technological society. Finally, the major weakness of Gandhi's political thought is the narrow range of its applicability. W. H. Morris Jones, for instance, comments that "those parts of Gandhi's political philosophy which penetrate deeply do so only on the narrow front of resistance politics."⁹ In Arthur A. Koestler's view "it was a noble game which could only be played against an adversary abiding by certain rules of common decency instilled by long tradition, otherwise it could amount to mass suicide."¹⁰ Nevertheless, those scholars who have pointed out the weaknesses of Gandhian political thought have also admitted that Gandhi had developed a new weapon of political change and under certain circumstances, this weapon of *satyagraha* might be used as an effective instrument."¹¹

III. The Prayer Campaign of the Ceylon Workers

Congress of Sri Lanka in January 1986.

(a) Date, Duration and Locale

The prayer campaign was organized on 14th January 1986 by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) on behalf of the "Stateless" persons of Indian Origin in Sri Lanka, a significant proportion of whom are members of the (CWC). It commenced on that day in almost all plantations in the central highlands of Sri Lanka. It was called - off on the 18th as President J. R. Jayawardene gave an assurance to the CWC that the necessary bill granting citizenship to stateless persons will be introduced in the Parliament in due course.

(b) Objectives

(i) Background

The Political problems relating to citizenship of people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka really began with the Donoughmore Commission's recommendation of universal suffrage in 1931, which provided voting rights to all British subjects including people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka. However, "its origin could be traced back to the reluctance of the Sinhalese to take up the regimented life of the estates."¹² Consequently, Indians were brought to Sri Lanka by the British to work in commercial plantations from the mid - 19th century. W. H. Wiggins has observed that,

Between 1871 and 1881 during Coffee boom - 24000 new immigrants arrived each year and again, between 1891 and 1900 - when tea planting expanded very rapidly - 34000 more came annually. These migrants added 10 per cent to the total population.¹³

In addition to plantation workers there were other Indians who too, came to Sri Lanka in search of employment and business opportunities in the urban areas.

The Sinhalese, especially those of the central highlands, the Kandyan Sinhalese, opposed the recommendations of the Donoughmore Commission because they feared that enfranchisement of the Indian population might dilute their electoral strength. Further, there was the fact of economic rivalries between Indian and Sinhalese traders. As a result, the Colonial Office in 1931 proposed a compromise settlement as an interim measure.

Under this there were three ways by which the franchise could be obtained.

- (1) by the 1924 system, which enfranchised property owning British subjects (largely Europeans);
- (2) by Domicile, designed for the old established population; and
- (3) by certificates of permanent settlement for Indian settlers.¹⁴

Due to deliberate governmental restriction in registering Indians in the late 1930s the number of Indian voters declined from 225,000 in 1939 to 168,000 in 1943¹⁵. However, with the increase of constituencies in 1947, under the Soulbury Constitution, the Indian Tamils were able to elect seven of their members to Parliament. Following independence, the United National Party (UNP) enacted a series of legislative measures designed to restrict the grant of citizenship and franchise rights in 1948 and 1949: (i) the Ceylon Citizenship Act No. 18 of 1948; (ii) Indian and Pakistani (Citizenship) Act No. 3 of 1949 and (iii) the Ceylon Parliamentary Election Amendment Act No. 48 of 1948. The sum effect of all these three Acts was as A. J. Wilson observed:

"To disfranchise the overwhelming majority of Indians who had up to date possessed the right to vote, and (2) to make it extremely difficult for those Indians and Pakistanis who wished to become to qualify.¹⁶

Government spokesman in justifying these laws, argued that the Indians had no permanent interest in the country. They further insisted that the Indians not only maintained connections with their families and relatives in India but that they also periodically visited their families in India and remitted moneys to them. The Ceylon Indian Congress, organised, without much success, passive resistance to these laws. Indians were called upon to boycott the registration procedures for citizenship provided under the Act. This issue became a controversial issue in the internal politics as well as a matter of continuous disputes between India and Sri Lanka.

From 1940 to 1964 the leaders of both India and Sri Lanka had attempted without success to solve the problem. However, in October 1964 the Prime Minister of India Lal Bahadur Shastri and the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Sirimavo Bandaranaike met in New Delhi and signed an agreement known as Indo-Ceylon Agreement of 1964. Under the 1964 Agreement, Sri Lanka agreed to grant citizenship to 300,000 of an estimated 975,000 persons of Indian origin

in the island. India agreed to grant Indian citizenship and repatriate to India 525,000 such persons. The period of validity of the agreement being 15 years. It was agreed that the political status of the remaining 150,000 persons of Indian origin would be negotiated later. In 1974, the then Prime Minister of India and Sri Lanka met and agreed that one half of this number would be repatriated to India and the other half would be given Sri Lanka citizenship.

Due to numerous procedural problems and difficulties the Indo - Ceylon Agreement of October 1964 and the subsequent Pact of 1974 could not be implemented fully within the stipulated period which lapsed in October 1979. Only 506,000 applications were received by the Indian High Commission in Sri Lanka opting for Indian citizenship out of the expected 600,000 persons which showed a shortfall of 94,000. On the Indian side it was argued that as the above Pacts were no more valid it was not the responsibility of India to grant citizenship to the rest of the negotiated number. The following statistics show the stage of implementation of Indo - Sri Lanka Agreements as at 1986:

a. Sri Lanka

(1) Number applied for Sri Lanka citizenship	625,000
(2) Number to be granted	375,000
(3) Number granted	197,535
(Natural increase granted)	66,500
(4) Number awaiting grant on ratio of four to granted Sri Lanka citizenship when seven are granted Indian citizenship.	43,153

b. India

(1) Number applied for Indian citizenship	506,000
(2) Number to be granted citizenship	600,000
(3) Number granted	421,207
(Natural increase granted)	170,000
(4) Number repatriated	337,066
(Natural increase repatriated)	123,835
(5) Number granted Indian citizenship and still remaining in Sri Lanka.	84,141

Source: Sri Lanka, Parliamentary Debate (Hansard) Official Report, Vol. 39 No. 7, col. 349.

In discussing the 1986 *satyagraha* campaign of the CWC it would be useful to review some earlier attempts by the CWC to organize such campaigns.

The Ceylon Indian Congress (CIC), the immediate predecessor to the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) organized a *satyagraha* campaign in 1952 to oppose the implementation of the Citizenships Act enacted by the United National Party (UNP) Government in 1948 and 1949. The CIC's *satyagraha* campaign had two fronts: (i) the fast before the Prime Minister's Office by a selected band of *satyagrahis*, and (ii) sit-down *satyagraha* at the House of Representatives and in the premises of various Ministers. The purpose of this campaign was to focus attention on the plight of the stateless and voteless Indian settlers in the Island.

The *satyagraha* campaign which started on 28th April, 1952 continued for five days. On the first three days of the campaign, the police bundled the *satyagrahis* into vans and dropped them at different places. But from the fourth day onwards the *satyagraha* went on as scheduled. At the fast that took place in front of the Prime Minister's Office Thondaman and Aziz and 41 other *satyagrahis* participated. There was no interference by the police. Sit-down *satyagraha* was also continued at the House of Representatives and the Office of the Minister of Home Affairs.¹⁸ The campaign, however, did not produce the desired goal of the CIC namely, the repeal of the Citizenship Acts. Nevertheless, the CIC claimed that "direct political action of a non-violent nature has not been utilized by any political group in Ceylon on such scale,"¹⁹ in the past to indicate the grievances of the people.

In 1950, at the Tenth Annual Conference of the CIC held at Matale, it was decided that the Ceylon Indian Congress be renamed the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), with a political wing which subsequently became the successor to the Ceylon Indian Congress. This paved the way for the indigenous people also to participate in the activities of the CWC. Since the 1950s CWC has been in the forefront of all agitations launched to regain the citizenship rights of the plantation workers. As the editorial of the Congress News of the CWC observed

The CWC was, for many years, only a trade union organization and its political overtones, then tended to reflect the problems and disabilities that stemmed from disenfranchisement and statelessness of a whole community of persons of Indian origin, the majority of which were plantation workers.²⁰

The CWC, in April 1984, organized a strike demanding pay rise for the plantation workers with the support of other trade unions in the plantations. Approximately six lakhs of workers went on strike on 1st April 1984 which lasted for 10 days. It was called off by the CWC on the 10th after a settlement was reached on the pay issue between President J. R. Jayawardene and the Leader of the CWC Sowmiamurthy Thondaman. In January 1986, however, the CWC launched a non-violent prayer campaign to press the Government to grant citizenship status to the stateless persons of Indian origin in Sri Lanka.

ii. Immediate Objective

The immediate objective of the prayer campaign of the CWC was to make the Government to solve the problem of statelessness among the people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka. Its ultimate objective was to bring pressure on the Government by non-violent means to make it realise the just demand of the stateless persons in Sri Lanka.

(c) Prayer Campaign - Participants and Leadership

The membership of the CWC (CWC commands a majority of plantation workers) were the main participants in the prayer campaign. With the exception of the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) led by Aziz and the UNP-sponsored Lanka Jatika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU), all other plantation unions supported and participated in the prayer campaign. For example, the General Secretary of the Lanka General Services Union (LGSU) Jayaratne Malliyagoda suggested that "all trade unions should meet before January 14 to explore any possibility of a sit-in-prayer by the plantation workers begins."²¹ Others such as the National Union Workers (NUW) supported the prayer campaign.

The leadership of the campaign was entirely in the hands of the Leader of the CWC assisted by his deputies M. S. Sellasamy, Annamalai and Jaya Peri Sundaram.

(d) Organization

In June 1985, Sowmiamurthy Thondaman made a statement that "if by the end of December 1985 the fundamental matters affecting the people of Indian origin in the country are not settled, I will consider my leadership and the policy followed a failure. And I will be prepared to stand down in favour of more dynamic policy..."²² Thereafter, he communicated his ideas to the estate leaders. The leaders met at district levels before attending the meeting of the National Council held on December 3, 1987. At this meeting a decla-

ration was formulated and unanimously adopted by the Council. According to this declaration it was proposed to organize a prayer campaign from *pongal* (Thai Pongal Day - 14th of January, 1986.) to *Putthandu* (Tamil New Year in April 1986) Thondaman declared that "we must live in this country, our motherland, with honour and self-respect. That is our right"²³ He further added that the "CWC-led struggle would be non-violent and peaceful. Like others, we need not take to the guns. We are followers of Mahathma Gandhi. We will follow the Gandhian way"²⁴

(e) Preparation for Action

As a preparation for the prayer campaign a meeting was arranged at Kotagala on November 18th 1985. While addressing the meeting among thousands of plantation workers Thondaman said that he and the CWC "expected President Jayawardene to solve the stateless problem by December 31." In declaration made at the National Council Meeting held on 3rd December, 1987, Thondaman briefly outlined the action to be taken by the CWC:

The entire body of plantation workers will be called upon to participate in the CWC programme... The plantation workers now want to come into their own and enjoy the same rights, privileges and benefits other communities in Sri Lanka enjoy. To achieve this it is necessary for the plantation workers to devote their time every day up to forenoon to the programme formulated by the CWC.²⁵

Thereafter the CWC President addressed a series of meetings where he proposed the three month long five hour daily prayer campaign from 7-00 a. m. till 12-00 noon in all plantation areas.

(f) Preliminary Action

As a preliminary action the Leader of the CWC Thondaman wrote to his Excellency the President reminding him of his statement about ending the problems of plantation workers of Indian origin by December 31 1985. But there was no response to this from the President. Again the Leader of the CWC sent a letter to the President on December 17, enclosing copies of the December 3 Declaration and his previous letters. There was an immediate response to the December 17 letter and the President invited Thondaman for a meeting to resolve the problem.

(g) Action

On the 14th of January 1986, the CWC commenced its Gandhian prayer cum protest campaign. Prayer meetings were held from 7-00 a. m. to 12-00

noon in almost all the estates with a demand for full day's wages for work done in the afternoons. There was no plucking of tea from 7-00 a. m. to 12-00 noon. After two days of prayer campaign throughout the length and breadth of the plantations, the campaign was called off on the 16th as President Jayawardene agreed that necessary Acts will be brought in Parliament to end the statelessness of the plantation workers.

Reaction of the Government

As a response to the CWCs Prayer campaign President Jayawardene held a meeting on 1st January 1986 with the Chairman of the State Plantation Corporation (SPC) and the Chairman of the Janatha Estate Development Board (JEDB), the two state agencies which control 70 per cent of the country's tea estates. A directive sent out thereafter to SPC and JEDB estate managements instructed them to pay only half a day's wages to any worker reporting for work at 1-00 p. m. after the prayer meeting for the day had ended. Workers who reported to work after 1-00 p. m. were to be denied work.²⁶

At the same time President Jayawardene responded favourably to the pleas of the CWC to end statelessness and he invited the CWC for negotiations. After a series of negotiations, the President and the Cabinet agreed to grant citizenship to 94,000 stateless persons of Indian origin in Sri Lanka. The government of India, also consented to the decision.

The Bill to Provide for the grant of the status of Sri Lankan Citizen to certain stateless persons of Indian origin was presented in Parliament on 30th January, 1986 and was passed on the following day.

The Opposition parties especially the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) opposed this Bill and its leader Sirimavo Bandaranaike argued that this Bill violated the earlier Pacts, e. g. Sirimavo - Shastri Pact of 1964. Also the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna leader Dinesh Gunawardene and the ex-UNP Minister Cyril Mathew opposed this Bill. However, the Opposition Parties failed in its attempt to mobilize the people against the Bill, partly due to the support of the Maha Sangha.

IV. An Evaluation of the CWC Prayer Campaign

The CWC prayer campaign was mass-based and it was a non-violent direct action. A statement adopted at the meeting of the National Council of the CWC in March 1986 explained why it decided to launch direct action by quoting the following passage of Dr. Martin Luther King:

In any non - violent campaign there are four classic steps - the collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist, negotiation, self - purification and direct action ... You may well ask, why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiations - a better path? You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed this is the very purpose of direct action. Non - violent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue... 27

The CWC argued that this was exactly what its prayer campaign set out to do and succeeded in doing.

When we look at the prayer campaign of the CWC in the light of the Gandhian technique of *satyagraha*, it is evident that CWC fulfilled some requirements that were necessary for a *satyagraha* campaign. The plantation workers had a just cause and every member of that community felt that the problem of statelessness should be settled on a humanitarian basis. The CWC was ready to negotiate with the Government for a settlement and, in fact, it did negotiate. However, the CWC did not adequately educate the plantation workers on the Gandhian principles of non - violent resistance or conduct training classes for volunteers. Gandhi became convinced that *satyagraha* based on inner conviction was more effective than non - violence practised as a temporary policy.

A close study of Gandhi reveals that for him two very important questions of politics are obedience to law and the employment of force. According to Gandhi the State should safeguard the rights and obligations of its citizens. It must guarantee the common good for all its citizens. The question of disobedience arises in the case of State which does not fulfil the above purpose. Gandhi was of the view that in the interests of society good citizens can disobey the law in order to maintain a good State. He clearly distinguished between law and morality. The laws of the State must guide citizens on the correct moral path.

In the case of the prayer campaign of the CWC, the workers who participated in the campaign felt that they were denied the basic rights due to them. But the CWC used the non - violent campaign only as a temporary weapon. Nevertheless, it may be said that the campaign brought the necessary change or desired goal. Why? To answer this we have to look for reasons other than the prayer campaign of the CWC itself.

The following four reasons have been advanced for the success of the prayer campaign:

1. Humanitarian aspects of the problem.
2. The fear that India might interfere in Sri Lanka's internal affairs on the pretext of helping the people of Indian origin.
3. The possibility of the Tamil militants getting a foothold among the stateless persons of Indian origin.
4. Pressure of Indian Government on Sri Lanka Government.
5. The economic consequences of prayer campaign in the strategic plantation sector.

While introducing the Bill to grant citizenship to the stateless persons in the Parliament, Prime Minister R. Premadasa quoted the following section of the speech made by President J. R. Jayawardene at Gampola.

If a child without parents is handed over to me, What am I to do? Am I to put it to the sea, bury it, burn it or kill it? I have to bring up the child. There should be human feeling. So we negotiate with the Indian Government and undertook to take over half of this group of people. They would take the other half.²⁸

Further, the Prime Minister argued that these people have lived in Sri Lanka for generations and contributed their labour for the enrichment of the economy and development of the country. Therefore, it was humanistic to grant them citizenship.

Continuing his speech Prime Minister Premadasa said that "so long as the problem of persons of Indian origin remains unsolved, India may have reasons to interfere in our internal affairs on the pretext that persons of Indian origin have been affected."²⁹ On the question of statelessness the Maha Sangha too had the same views. In a statement to the All - Party Conference the Supreme Council of the Maha Sangha observed the following:

"...due to the presence of Indians in this country, India interferes in Sri Lanka's internal Affairs. In the recent past India's interference in our affairs has increased even further. This is because of the so-called Indians who have not got Sri Lankan citizenship. ... We should not have a category of persons who call themselves Indians. This can easily be achieved by sending back those who have

to be sent to India as stated in the Sirimavo - Shastri Pact and giving citizenship to the rest. Even though the numbers may be a little more, the Supreme Sangh a Council declares that the Council is not opposed to their being given citizenship in order to arrive at a solution to this problem''³⁰

Among factors which influenced the decision of the government to grant citizenship to the stateless persons was the stand taken by the Tamil militant groups on this problem. In the first round of talks at Thimpu, Bhutan, between the representatives of the Government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil groups, the Tamil delegation insisted the four basic principles necessary for a settlement of the Tamil problem; among which granting Sri Lankan citizenship to all stateless Tamils in the island was also included.

Prime Minister R. Premadasa pointed out in Parliament that the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS), a Tamil militant group has been trying to impress upon the plantation workers that their democratic organizations such as the CWC and DWC were really not looking after their interests and that the EROS was ready to fight for their rights. It was these circumstances that forced the Government to change its minds on the citizenship issue.

Speaking at the debate on the Bill, the Leader of the Opposition, Anura Bandaranaike pointed out that "granting of citizenship to 600,000 people and their natural increase was India's obligation,"³¹ and argued that this Bill renders the Kandyan peasantry impotent. Further, he maintained that the people were not consulted before granting citizenship to the stateless persons. He, therefore, opposed the Bill. But on the Government's side it was pointed out that when Sirimavo Bandaranaike signed the Indo - Sri Lanka Agreement in 1964, to grant Sri Lanka citizenship for 375,000 persons of Indian origin, the SLFP did not consult the people.

According to available information, the Government of India, too, took part in the negotiations to find a solution to the problem of the stateless persons. In a statement issued by the Indian High Commission on the problem of people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka it was stated that:

"Under direction from the Government of India, the High Commission of India undertook detailed negotiations with the Minister for National Security, Lalith Athulathmudali, and the Minister for Rural Industries Development, S. Thondaman, between 11th and 14th January''³²

The above statement shows that the Government of India too was actively involved in the process of negotiations to settle the stateless problem.

The decision on the part of the CWC to launch a prayer campaign and not a strike in January 1986 needs to be probed. As noted earlier, the CWC in April 1984 appealed to its members to go on strike in pursuance of a demand for a pay rise for plantation workers. However, in 1986, on the question of stateless persons it was decided to launch a prayer campaign. Why did the CWC change its strategy in these two instances? The answer to this question has to be found in the different political situations prevailing in the country in 1984 and in 1986. In 1986, the Government of Sri Lanka was engaged in a full scale war with the Tamil militants in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. The situation was not so in 1984. Furthermore, the Tamil militants have adopted an armed struggle as their strategy to achieve their goal. The CWC had never approved in the past violence as a method to achieve its objectives. There was reason to believe that a full scale strike action at that time might have taken a violent turn. The CWC being a constituent party in the Government could not simply ignore this possibility. Or it could have only taken such a decision at the risk of leaving the government. The CWC, therefore, decided to resort to a non-violent and peaceful method to achieve its objective.

The above analysis clearly shows that the prayer campaign, by itself could not have brought necessary change. Several other factors among which the possible interference by India in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka, possible infiltration of Tamil militants among stateless persons and human aspects of the problem influenced the decision of the Government of Sri Lanka. Most important factor, however, was the fact that in 1986, Sri Lanka was facing a civil war in the North and East and that it did not wish to open another front in the central highlands.

Thus, the evidence shows that not only the prayer campaign of the CWC but also the volatile political situation prevailing in the country at that time helped the Government at that time to pass an Act to solve the stateless problem of the people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka.

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