

## **N. RAM: FIRST INDIAN NATIONAL TO GET "SRI LANKA RATHNA" AWARD** By D.B.S.JEYARAJ

The Highest national honour conferred by Sri Lanka on non - nationals is the "Sri Lanka Rathna " award.Narasimhan Ram the Editor in chief of four chennai based publications became the first Indian national to be awarded that honour on Nov 14th. Apart from the fact that "The Hindu", " Frontline" "Business Line" and "The Sports Star" are very familiar to Sri Lankan readers there were other reasons too for the sixty year old Tamil Brahmin of Iyengar stock to be made Sri Lanka Rathna. Predominant among them is the abiding interest he shows in Sri Lankan affairs and his contribution to the resolution of the ethnic conflict here.

N. Ram as he is generally known has focussed much of his personal and professional attention towards Sri Lanka in general and the issue of resolving the ethnic conflict in particular. In the eighties when India played a mediator role people like N. Ram played a supportive role in an unofficial capacity. Being close to almost all the big players in both Countries and having special access to the power corridors of New Delhi N. Ram were very effective in a behind the scenes role.

Though modest about it Ram contributed greatly to the process which culminated in the signing of the Indo - Lanka accord by JR Jayewardene and Rajiv Gandhi on July 29th 1987. On paper it was and still is the best possible arrangement ever made to resolve the Sri Lankan crisis by guaranteeing the unity and territorial integrity of the Country on the one hand and ensuring the legitimate rights of Sri Lankan Tamils on the other. The 13th amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution paved the way for Provincial councils while the 16th amendment made Tamil an official language. Both amendments were off - shoots of the Indo - Lanka accord.

In later years India withdrew from its mediatory role for reasons that are well - known. The Hindu too stepped back from its crusading role but continued to be a concerned commentator and observer. It is regarded in India as the foremost authority on Sri Lankan affairs and has effectively helped mould public opinion on the issue. The paper is influential enough to set the parameters for most media coverage in India.

Ram himself is often cited as an expert on Sri Lanka and is interviewed by mediapersons and diplomats from different parts of the world. He is also busy on the seminar and lecture circuit. What is of importance is the continuing reliance of political leaders and bureaucrats on the input provided by Ram and the Hindu in formulating and implementing policy on Sri Lanka.

It was the Hindu which played a leading role in encouraging an interventionist role for India in Sri Lanka in the eighties. Today it advocates an open "hands off "policy towards Sri Lanka while being supportive of whatever assistance possible to help resolve the problem in a manner acceptable to all sections of the people. Ram himself with the wisdom of hindsight sees the earlier New Delhi policy as being "schizoid".

This decisive shift in Indian policy also took on an anti - tiger veneer after the Rajiv Gandhi assassination. Once it was established that the LTTE was responsible for the killing the Hindu along with many other Indian media became stridently critical of the LTTE. This perspective gathered momentum over the years as LTTE conduct deteriorated into extremism bordering on neo - fascism. Being privy to a lot of in depth information about the LTTE compared to other Indian media the journal has been firmly opposed to tiger antics on a principled basis. This position manifests itself very clearly.

This naturally has led to much resentment in the tiger and pro - tiger camp. The tigers and fellow travellers feel that New Delhi could have been swayed to some extent during the BJP period if not for the Hindu and "Hindu" Ram. Though Ram was for long Editor of "Frontline" and "Sports Star" he is popularly referred to as "Hindu" Ram. Since he has been the public face of the Hindu group of publications for long and has been forthright in his criticism of the LTTE it is N. Ram who is often singled out for virulent attacks by the tigers and their acolytes.

Most of the pro - tiger elements in Tamil Nadu have a background of Dravidian nationalist ideology. A crucial component of this ideology is its pronounced anti - Brahminism. As N. Ram is from a Vaishnavite Iyengar Brahmin family which incidently owns the "Hindu" Group of publications the pro - tiger lobby accusations are casteist and charge him of being anti - Tamil. The "Hindu" is derisively referred to as the "Mahavishnu of Mount Road".

This is a ruse regularly used by the tiger elements. If the LTTE is criticised it is twisted as being anti - Tamil. The Hindu editorial policy and N. Ram's personal worldview to a great extent is against communalism, ultra - nationalism, fundamentalism etc. Contrary to the name "The Hindu" the newspaper has firmly and actively opposed Hindu fundamentalism in India. The paper and newsmagazine have been in the frontline of resistance to the Bharatiya Janatha Party and its kindred organizations known as the "Sangh Parivar like Rashtriya Seva sangham (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) Bajrang Dal etc.

It is this ideological position that forms the basis of policy towards the LTTE. Despite claims of fighting for lofty ideals the LTTE of today has become a reactionary outfit . It also poses a long term threat to the stability of India. The Hindu and N. Ram feel that the best solution to Sri Lankas ethnic crisis is maximum devolution to a federal unit within a united Sri Lanka. It was felt in recent times that Chandrika Kumaratunga provided the best bet in Sri Lanka towards the realisation of that goal. There is no doubt that recent developments such as the rise of Sinhala chauvinist forces like the Jathika Hela Urumaya and Mahinda Rajapakse's insistence on a unitary Constitution etc will be prickly issues to the avowed policy of both India , The Hindu and N. Ram.

The LTTE lobby loves to attack the "Hindu" and N. Ram as causes for its abysmal failure in hoodwinking the Indian establishment. I too have been attacked for this "Hindu" connection. I was the Frontline correspondent in Colombo from 1985 to 1987 and the Hindu correspondent from 1986 to 1987. Nowadays I contribute articles to Frontline infrequently. Because of this the tiger lobby attacks me too as an Indian or Brahmin stooge something which tickles my fancy often.

What the tiger lobby tends to forget now is the fact that the "Hindu" and "Frontline" voiced the grievances of the Tamil people to the world during the 1983 - 1987 years. N. Ram himself took a keen personal interest in Sri Lankan issues and interviewed people like JR Jayewardene, Lalith Athulathmudali, Gamini Dissanayake, Appapillai Amirthalingam and Velupillai Pirapakaran. Ram's interview with the LTTE leader carried in two instalments remains the most quoted one by Pirapakaran so far. The LTTE and its supporters would do well to do some soul searching into what went wrong with their "hindu" connection instead of launching anti - brahmin tirades against Ram.

Sometimes I am amused when I read the verbal abuse in pro - tiger Tamil journalisms about the "paarpaneeyam" (brahminism) of N. Ram. It appears to me that some of these critics perceive him as a typical orthodox Iyengar brahmin with the striped "namam" on his forehead. The reality is starkly different from perception.

Far from being a conservastive brahmin the Hindu editor in chief is a progressive cosmopolitan equally at ease in the drawing rooms of the West and the parlours of the East. His first wife Susan was an English lady who was for many years in charge of Oxford University press publications in India. He is now married to Mariam who I believe is a Keralite Syrian Christian. She is an advertising executive. He is no chanter of Sanskrit slogas or manthras but someone capable of quoting from the Western classics as he once engaged in a verbal duel with JR Jayewardene on Shakespeare.

Since this article is about the Sri Lanka Rathna and is written primarily for Sri Lankan readers I have concentrated mostly on the Sri Lankan angle. Ram's CV itself says that one of his special interests in the Journalist field is - " The Sri Lanka ethnic crisis and the Tamil question; the experience of, and lessons from, India's interaction with this problem." It would however be a gross error to confine this piece to that perspective alone. The man has a multiple of talents and a variety of interests.

One of his chief interests is cricket. My first visit to his house at Alwarpettai in Chennai was in 1985. England was touring India. I was watching a thrilling match on TV and reluctantly left for his house as he invited me to come over in the afternoon. When I went there he asked me to come up where along with a couple of friends Ram was watching the game on TV too. I happily sat there and watched. It was only after the match was over that we got talking. I later learnt that he had captained the Madras University team and also played for Tamil Nadu state in the Ranji Trophy tournament. He was a wicket - keeper batsman.

It was this cricketing background which helped Ram strike up a deep friendship with the late Gamini Dissanayake. I am not sure but I think NPK Salve the Indian politician and Cricket Board chairman introduced Ram to his Sri Lankan counterpart first. Both became close. Gamini metamorphosed over the years into a firm friend of India and a dove on the ethnic question. The Gamini - Ram link was of great value in the run up to the 1987 accord. Ram was used as an "unofficial emissary" to carry messages that could not be sent "officially" between Colombo and New Delhi. Like the ping - pong diplomacy between USA and China this was cricket diplomacy. Gamini and Mrs. Dissanayake spent a few days with Ram in India a few weeks before his death.

Another of Ram's characteristics is his pro - CPM or marxist sympathies. In his youth he was an activist of the pro - marxist Indian Students Federation. It was as an ISF activist that I first saw him in an incident of high political drama. I was then a student at the Madras Christian College in Thambaram. Muttuvel Karunanidhi was the DMK chief minister of Tamil Nadu. There was a rice shortage then due mainly to blackmarketeers hoarding it. Karunanidhi appealed to the people asking them to distribute hoarded rice.

ISF student members took matters into their hands and in a show of force seized ssacks of rice from the hoarders and began distributing to the people. Police was called in and 16 ISF members arrested. Ram was a state level office bearer of the ISF and arrived at the scene to sort out matters. He was detained too. The University students organized a city wide strike. As a result of the student agitation the detained persons including Ram were released.

When I was sorting out my papers prior to leaving Sri Lanka I ran across the leaflet issued then condemning the detention of N. Ram. I kept it with me and showed it to Ram later when I met him in the USA. He seemed visibly embarassed at being reminded of his hectic activist past. Ram continues to maintain his leftist connections and CPM leanings though that is not allowed to affect Hindu editorial policy. Ram is closely associated with Prakash Karat the current Indian CPM leader. Due perhaps to the CPM background Ram keenly follows developments in China too and has written a series of articles after his numerous trips there.

Another interest is literature though his bachelors and masters degrees were in history. Ram was closely associated with the doyen of Indian writers in English RK Narayan and even co - wrote a biography of his early years with Susan Ram. Once he was accompanying Narayan to see his former residence at Puraswakkam to find that the old house was being demolished for a new building. Ram managed to salvage the wooden lattice above the doorway and present it to Narayan as treasured memento. He is also a fan of crusading author Arundhathi Roy and was once seen sitting on the steps of the British Council auditorium to listen to her lecturing to a packed audience.

Among his many interests are dogs. Ram raises pedigreed cocker and golden spaniels that have won many , many prizes and ribbons. he is also fond of music and was one of the speakers recently at the release ceremony of the path - breaking "thiruvagasam in symphony" by Ilaiyarahaj. He is also an honoured invitee to many DMK functions and is often the only man in Western attire on stage amid the "karai verti" (bordered dhotis) clad DMK functionaries. Though the lunatic fringe of dravidianism continues to rant and rave mainstream dravidianism has established a sound relationship with the Mount Road Mahavishnu. Ram is also associated with the Nawab of Arcot in the harmony association which promotes unity and amity in India.

The question of free expression is of crucial importance. Ram has been an ardent votary of the principle. "The Hindu" faced a crisis recently when Tamil Nadu chief minister Jayalalitha Jayaram launched an offensive against the paper. She was offended

by the criticism levelled by the paper. After filing a series of cases in court she overstepped her mark by getting arrest warrants issued against senior journalists including executive editor Malini Parthasarathy a cousin of Ram.. Ram spearheaded the resistance to this abuse of power and countered Jayalalitha at many levels. Finally she backed down. The incident demonstrated clearly the extent of influence the paper and its editor in chief had at an all India level.

Ram has been in journalism since 1966. It is a family business as the "Hindu" is owned by members of the Kasturi Rangan family. Ram also acquired a masters in comparative journalism from the Columbia University in New York. His biggest journalist triumph was the Bofors scandal of the late eighties and nineties pertaining to artillery equipment bough from Sweden. Together with Geneva based Chitra Subramaniam and also on his own N. Ram uncovered many aspects of L'affaire bofors . He won many honours and awards for this He was also awarded the Pathma Bhushan in 1990 by the President of India. (R. Venkatraman)

I have been interacting with N. Ram for about two decades now. The relationship has been volatile at times because of certain issues. I was extremely critical of the IPKF and as a result was fired by the Hindu then. This dispute however did not affect our personal relationship. Even professionally I contribute articles to Frontline and Hindu depending of course on the availability of time and space. I will however be appreciative of him for two things.

One is for his solidarity and support when I was arrested by Sri Lankan authorities in 1987 for alleged links with the LTTE. The flimsy basis was an interview I obtained with then deputy - leader of LTTE Gopalswamy Mahendrarajah alias Mahathaya. The interview was published in "the Island" and not "The Hindu". When Neelan Tiruchelvam informed Ram of the arrest he took up the issue though he was advised by many to "keep out" since it was not directly connected to "The Hindu". But Ram undertook a special trip to Colombo to meet with JR Jayewardene and urge my release. He also published the "Mhathaya" interview in "the Hindu" thereby incurring displeasure in sections of South Block.

The other was when the LTTE conducted a campaign against "Muncharie" the Tamil weekly I was editing in Toronto. I was compelled to shut the paper down because the tigers intimidated advertisers and sellers of the paper. Not only did Ram condemn the incident but also published my open letter on the problem. He also alerted several media rights organizations about the issue. Fearing for my physical safety in Toronto as I had earlier been attacked and hospitalised by baseball bat wielding LTTE goons he asked me to come down to Madras and work and stay there for a while. I declined but remain grateful for the timely offer.

Sri Lanka is in the throes of a major crisis. The paradigm shift in Southern politics of moving towards Federalism has received a jolt from Mahinda Rajapakse's insistence on a unitary state. The LTTE through its enforced boycott has demonstrated that it is shedding the so called exploration of a federal solution and heading out towards its Eelamist goal. The coming months will be extremely volatile.

"The Hindu" from its vantage point in Chennai will no doubt be monitoring and reporting developments. Wise counsel is necessary to ease tensions and restore sanity. "The Hindu" group carrying much credibility on Sri Lanka can make a positive contribution in this. Narasimhan Ram will be taking a personal interest in all this. After all he is now an honoured "non - citizen" of the Island being a "Sri Lanka Rathna".

**(ENDS)**