

Japan's role in Sri Lanka gaining independence

By **Senaka Weeraratna**

(Note: Mr. Senaka Weeraratna, Attorney – at – law, delivered the keynote address at a Symposium held on the premises of the Japanese Parliament (Conference Room No. 101 of the Diet) on 14th November, 2018 on the topic titled ‘ Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbour ignited the liberation of Asia from Western Domination – Time for Asia to express gratitude to Japan’. The Symposium was organized by the Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact.

Mr. Weeraratna was the first Sri Lankan and first Asian to thank Japan on the premises of Japan’s Parliament for making huge blood sacrifices of Japanese soldiers and thereby paving the way for the liberation of Europe's Asian colonies including British occupied Ceylon.

The crux of his argument was as follows:

“The time has come to challenge the hype that Sri Lanka won independence from Britain in 1948 exclusively by our own local efforts through an exchange of correspondence and political negotiations without any supportive foreign factor. This British centric - friendly narrative is increasingly unsustainable in the light of new evidence”.

This article is based on Mr. Weeraratna’s aforesaid paper)

.....

Sri Lanka gained Independence in February 1948, almost effortlessly (without blood letting) when compared to what other countries had to face. There was no mass-based independence struggle, civil disobedience movement or armed rebellion in Sri Lanka unlike that in India, Burma, Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Indonesia and Vietnam. Sri Lanka failed to produce a single iconic global figure in the pre-independence period that the rest of the colonized world could emulate or look up to as an inspirational figure for their liberation struggles.

Asia has produced great freedom fighters such as Mahatma Gandhi, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (India), Mao Tse Tung, Chou En Lai (China), Ho Chi Minh, General Võ Nguyên Giáp, Phạm Văn Đồng (Vietnam), Sukarno, Mohammad Hatta (Indonesia), Aung San, U Nu (Burma), Jose Rizal (Philippines), among others. Africa had great anti- colonial leaders such as Patrice Lumumba (Congo), Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya), Nelson Mandela (South Africa), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania) and Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe).

Japan's role

Japan was never a European colony before its defeat in 1945 to produce freedom fighters. Nevertheless, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour (Dec. 1941) and other western colonial possessions in Asia, had a great impact on the psychology and morale of the people of Asia then mostly under western colonial domination, and its battle success in the early phase of the War

helped Asia's freedom fighters to step up their campaign for liberation from foreign occupation and achieve independence.

In the early part of the 20th century, Japan was the only country in the world that stood out openly for the liberation of Asia from western colonialism and had the capacity and resources to take on the challenge. 'Asia for Asians' became a battle cry of the Japanese. No other Asian country including China and India, took up such a Pan-Asian slogan or was placed in such a militarily strong position.

Japan's war policy intended a total break from Western dependence, including a rejection of bankrupt Western cultural traditions, which had been slavishly adopted since the Meiji restoration, and a return to an Asian consciousness (as opposed to Western) and Eastern civilizational values as a source for national greatness. Critical to the nation's survival in the midst of unbridled Westernization was political and cultural regeneration and a pan-Asian solidarity under Japanese leadership which was articulated as a new Order for Asia in resistance to Western imperialism.

Matsuoka Yosuke, then Japanese Foreign Minister, proclaimed the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere" in August 1940. The idea of decolonization of Asia from European domination under Japanese leadership resonated with Asians widely because, in the words of former U.S. President Herbert Hoover in 1942, "universally, the white man is hated by the Chinese, Malayan, Indian and Japanese alike," due to his heartless and spiteful conduct as a colonial master over a few hundred years.

Japan's military success in the Battle of Tsushima in 1905 prompted a young Oxford lecturer, Alfred Zimmern, to put aside his lesson on Greek history to announce to his class "the most historical event which has happened, or is likely to happen, in our lifetime has happened; the victory of a non-white people over a white people."

Japan's spectacular military victories at the beginning of the 20th century and their impact on Asian intellectuals are well documented in Pankaj Mishra's book titled, "From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia."

This work is a survey of Asian intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and their role in pan-Asian, pan-Islamic, and anti-colonial movements. The book begins with an electrifying moment in Asia's struggle for liberation from Western domination: the astounding Japanese naval victory over Russia at the Battle of Tsushima in May 1905, which stunned Asians and Africans living at the time under the yoke of colonialism.

Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohandas Gandhi, Sun Yat-Sen, Mao Zedong, the young Kemal Ataturk and nationalists in Egypt, Vietnam and many other countries welcomed Japan's decisive triumph in the Russo-Japanese War with euphoric zeal. "And they all drew the same lesson from Japan's victory," Pankaj Mishra writes. "White men, conquerors of the world, were no longer invincible."

Even Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, noted that "the reverberations of that victory have gone like a thunderclap through the whispering galleries of the East." The world wars that followed further

shrunk Europe of much of what remained of its moral and political authority in Asian eyes. “In the long view, however,” Mishra concludes, “it is the battle of Tsushima that seems to have struck the opening chords of the recession of the West.”

Japan’s defeat of Russia in 1905 was uplifting news for Asians. For the first time since the middle ages, a non-European country had vanquished a European power in a major war. And Japan’s victory gave way to a hundred- and-one fantasies – of national freedom, racial dignity, or simple vengefulness – in the minds of those who had bitterly endured European occupation of their lands. Mahatma Gandhi then made an astute far reaching forecast. He remarked that “so far and wide have the roots of Japanese victory spread that we cannot now visualise all the fruit it will put forth.”

Japan’s proposal for equality of races at League of Nations

Japan had championed the cause of peoples under European colonial rule at the Treaty of Paris (1918–19) and the formation of the League of Nations. Japan proposed an amendment to the League’s covenant that would ensure “equal and just treatment in every respect, making no distinction, either in law or in fact, on account of their race or nationality.” To their great shame, the western colonial powers rejected the notion of equality between human beings, fearing that it would become a challenge to white supremacy and the Colonial Order which suppressed non–white people. However, Japan by this proposal for recognition of equality of all, gained the esteem of Asians and Africans as the “logical leader of all coloured peoples.”

In respect to the Second World war, Jawaharlal Nehru observed; “it became ever clearer that the western democracies were fighting not for a change but for a perpetuation of the old order, ” and both the Allied and Axis powers shared a common war interest, the preservation of white supremacy and the colonial status quo. Both sides, he noted, embraced legacies of “empire and racial discrimination,” and in affirmation after the war, “the old imperialisms still functioned....”

Japan’s stunning military victories in 1941 – 1942

Thirty-six years after its victory in the Battle of Tsushima, Japan struck the greatest decisive blow ever by any non – white country or non – white people to European power in Asia with the attack on Pearl Harbour. In about 90 days, beginning on December 8, 1941, Japan overran the possessions of Britain, the US and the Netherlands in east and south-east Asia, taking the Philippines, Singapore, Malaya, Hong Kong, the Dutch East Indies, much of Siam and French Indochina, and Burma with bewildering swiftness to stand poised at the borders of India by early 1942. All over Asia, subject people cheered the Japanese advance into countries forcibly held and occupied by western colonial powers.

Days before Singapore fell to the Japanese in early 1942, the Dutch Prime Minister-in-Exile, Pieter Gerbrandy, had conveyed his fears and anxieties to Churchill and other Allied leaders in the following words “Japanese injuries and insults to the White population ... would irreparably damage white prestige unless severely punished within a short time”.

Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia’s former Prime Minister, has said “most Asians felt inferior to the European colonisers and rarely did we even consider independence a viable option.” The

colonies, he explained, were structured “to serve the European demand for raw materials and natural resources,” and were thus dependencies. But Japan’s expulsion of the British “changed our view of the world,” showing that “an Asian race, the Japanese” could defeat whites and with that reality dawned “ a new awakening amongst us that if we wanted to, we could be like the Japanese. We did have the ability to govern our own country and compete with the Europeans on an equal footing.” So despite the suffering under Japanese wartime occupation and the “tremendous disappointment” over the return of the British after the war, Mohamad wrote, the shackles of “mental servitude” had been broken.

Similarly, Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew testified that Japan’s defeat of the British “completely changed our world”.

Expressions of praise and gratitude to Japan

The Japanese with their stunning military victories over a common foe had made Asian people proud and stand erect with their heads held high.

“Britain was colonizing, enslaving Asian people before WW2. They ruled the Indian people for 180 years. It was Japan that got rid of the British from most of Asia and later all those countries gained independence.”

“Japan lost WW2 but as the consequence of Japan’s entry to war all S E Asian countries and India achieved their long hoped for independence from the Western colonial powers within 15 years after the end of the War.”

British historian Arnold Toynbee said:

“Japan put an end to West’s colonialism in Asia once and for all.”

Toynbee added “In World War II, Japanese people left a great history. Not for their own country but for countries that achieved benefit from the War. Those countries were ones that were included in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, a short-lived ideal that Japan held out. The biggest achievement Japanese people left in history is that they succeeded in displaying the fact that Westerners who dominated the world were not “Undefeatable Gods.””

Former Thai Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj Expressed his Admiration for Japan

The former Prime Minister of Thailand, Kukrit Pramoj, who was Chief Editor of the newspaper ‘Siam Rath’ at the time and who took office as Prime Minister in 1973, stated:

“It was thanks to Japan that all nations of Asia gained independence. For Mother Japan, it was a difficult birth which resulted in much suffering, yet her children are growing up quickly to be healthy and strong.

“Who was it that enabled the citizens of the nations of Southeast Asia to gain equal status alongside the United States and Britain today? It is because Japan, who acted like a mother to us all, carried out acts of benevolence towards us and performed feats of self-sacrifice. December 8th (1941) is the day when Mother Japan – who taught us this important lesson – laid her life on the line for us, after making a momentous decision and risking her own well-being for our sake. “Furthermore, August 15th (1945) is the day when our beloved and revered mother was frail and ailing. Neither of these two days should ever be forgotten.”

<http://www.japanese-greatest.com/mentality-culture/animation/kukrit-pramoj.html>

Long accustomed to servility in colonial countries, western powers grossly underestimated the post-war nationalism that the Japanese had both wittingly and unwittingly unleashed. They had also severely miscalculated their own staying power among foreign subject people innately hostile to them. Despite futile counter-insurgency operations and full-scale wars, especially in Indochina, the spread of decolonisation was swift and extraordinary.

Burma, which hardly had a full blown nationalist movement before 1935, became free in 1948. The Dutch in Indonesia resisted with a rear guard defense and US and British assistance but Indonesian nationalists led by Sukarno finally overpowered them and pushed them out in 1953. Postwar chaos forced Malaya, Singapore and Vietnam into long periods of insurgencies and wars, but an ultimate European retreat was never in doubt.

No colonial country withdraws voluntarily from its colonies unless there are insurmountable ‘ push ‘ factors or except under compelling circumstances. The best illustration of this proposition is the shameful return of the Dutch and the French to regain their colonies in Asia after the end of the second world war. Japanese occupation during World War II had ended Dutch rule, and the Japanese encouraged the previously suppressed Indonesian independence movement.

Despite their opposition to the tyranny of Nazi rule of France and Netherlands (1940 -1944), and delight in being liberated by the Allies, these two colonial powers were not prepared to share the freedom they gained in Europe with the subject people in Asia (and Africa). They were not welcomed when they returned. Indonesians under Sukarno with the help of Japanese volunteers that remained in Indonesia after the defeat of Japan, defeated the Dutch in a series of military battles to finally gain independence in 1949. Likewise the Viet Minh under Ho Chi Minh performed admirably to wrest control from the French by defeating them at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and finally resulting in their withdrawal from all colonies of French Indo – China under the Geneva Accords of 1954.

Japan’s unsung role in India’s independence struggle

British governance in India — three centuries of exorbitant taxation, unfair trade practices, rampant free-marketsteering and deliberate starvation had led to the deaths of millions of Indians in preventable famines. It was a holocaust worse than the much publicized Jewish Holocaust in Europe.

Japan played a critical (largely unsung) role in India’s struggle for independence by supporting Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and assisting him to form the Indian National Army (INA). It is argued with vehemence by informed observers that without Bose’s INA, India might never have achieved independence.

This is because, although the INA failed militarily in the Battles at Kohima and Imphal along the India–Burma border in 1944 as part of the Japanese attempted entry to India, its troops (INA) got another opportunity to challenge the British Colonial Government in a Delhi courtroom in 1945.

Three INA Officers were put on trial for treason at Red Fort. This move backfired on the British. The accused a Muslim, Sikh and Hindu justified their roles as liberators of a colonized nation and won the sympathy of the Indian public.

This led to support for the defendants spreading throughout the nation — including among Indians serving in the British Indian Army. These newly radicalized troops staged strikes and mutinies across the subcontinent in 1946 against the British occupation. With its once-solid military foundation shaken to the core — and facing widespread, huge demonstrations and possible mutinies by the three forces, Army, Navy and Air Force, on a scale bigger than the Indian Mutiny in 1857 — the British authorities decided that it was time to pack up and leave. On August 15, 1947, they granted India its independence.

An unwise partition of the Indian subcontinent, which placed two new nation-states in endless conflict, marked Britain's humiliating departure from India in 1947.

“Europe,” Jean-Paul Sartre claimed in his preface to Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, seemed to be “springing leaks everywhere.” “In the past we made history,” Sartre asserted, “and now it is being made of us.”

New Book – ‘Bose: An Indian Samurai’

In a new Book ‘Bose: An Indian Samurai’ by military historian General GD Bakshi, claims that the former British Prime Minister Clement Attlee had said that the role played by Netaji's Indian National Army was paramount in India being granted Independence, while the non-violent movement led by Gandhi was dismissed as having had minimal effect.

In the book, Bakshi cites a conversation between the then British PM Attlee and then Governor of West Bengal Justice PB Chakraborty in 1956 when Attlee – the leader of Labour Party and the British premier who had signed the decision to grant Independence to India in 1947 – had come to India and stayed in Kolkata as Chakraborty's guest.

Chakraborty, who was then the Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court and was serving as the acting Governor of West Bengal, is quoted as saying : “When I was acting governor, Lord Attlee, who had given us Independence by withdrawing British rule from India, spent two days in the governor's palace at Calcutta during his tour of India. At that time I had a prolonged discussion with him regarding the real factors that had led the British to quit India.”

“My direct question to Attlee was that since Gandhi's Quit India Movement had tapered off quite some time ago and in 1947 no such new compelling situation had arisen that would necessitate a hasty British departure, why did they had to leave?”

“In his reply Attlee cited several reasons, the main among them being the erosion of loyalty to the British crown among the Indian Army and Navy personnel as a result of the military activities of Netaji,” Chakraborty said.

“Toward the end of our discussion I asked Attlee what was the extent of Gandhi's influence upon the British decision to leave India. Hearing this question, Attlee's lips became twisted in a sarcastic smile as he slowly chewed out the word, ‘m-i-n-i-m-a-l’,” Chakraborty added.

Sri Lanka – a beneficiary of Japan's war to end European colonialism in Asia

Sri Lanka's Anagarika Dharmapala stood out as a global Buddhist missionary the first of its kind in the modern era. But Dharmapala never led a proactive swaraj (independence) movement anywhere near the scale of Gandhi or Subash Chandra Bose. Letter writing, essay writing and speech making which was the hallmark of our local national leaders never really disturbed or effectively weakened the resolve of the foreign occupier. Only armed resistance did. After the last two great Sinhala rebellions in 1818 and 1848, which were brutally crushed and which would constitute war crimes today under Nuremberg laws, the political will for any more such armed uprising against the foreign occupier for Lanka's freedom simply disappeared. Nevertheless freedom came to Sri Lanka one hundred years after the last shot was fired in the Matale rebellion in 1848, on a platter because of the blood sacrifices made by soldiers of other Asian countries led by Japan during and after the second world war.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian Prime Minister (1947 – 1964) when asked in the 1930s to name a likely date that India would win independence from Britain, replied by saying it would probably be in the late 1970s i.e. long after their time.

Major – General Mohan Singh, a pioneer of the Indian National Army (INA) in Malaya, has said “The British had not given even an empty promise even in 1939 to grant us complete freedom after the war” (The Reader's Digest Illustrated History of World War II).

The fact that India gained freedom in 1947 much earlier than the date that Nehru thought was possible, followed by Burma and Ceylon in 1948, was largely due to impact of both external and internal factors.

S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, former Prime Minister of Ceylon (1956- 1959), never sought credit for a 'freedom fight' that never took place in Ceylon. He himself said that one morning he got up from bed to read in the daily newspapers that Ceylon had been granted independence by the British (without a true liberation struggle). There were no 'freedom' related trials in Court, no long term incarceration of prisoners for 'fighting' the British, not a single Judgment from a British governed Court in Ceylon on 'the independence movement'. Our 'fight' was basically confined to letter writing while always striving to remain in the good books of the colonizer. Our national leaders (some with knighthoods gained from the British) gleefully attired in three piece western clothes, sought Dominion status not total independence like Burma did at the time of its independence on January 04, 1948. We preferred to retain links with the 'mother country' on the footing of a British colony and our people as British subjects, rather than seek total freedom.

Therefore it is time to rewrite the grand narrative of how Sri Lanka achieved independence taking into account the external factors and Japan's war against the Western colonial countries which ultimately sealed the fate of European colonialism in Asia. The retreat of the West from its colonies in the East may well be said to be the singular most important event of the 20th century.

We also have a moral obligation to right a great wrong done to Japan. In other words, to call on Asian countries to shun looking at Japan as an aggressor with criminal intent to plunder and loot other Asian countries a line pushed by massive western propaganda but to look at Japan as the real spark that ignited the fight all over Asia for independence from western domination. The time has come for fellow Asians who have benefited from Japan's massive war effort and the blood sacrifices of Japanese soldiers to concede due acknowledgement to Japan.

To single out Japan for war crimes selectively while avoiding any mention of the crimes

committed by western countries in third-world countries including calling for reparations which both Germany and Japan have paid, is anything but a travesty of justice.

What is surprising and morally repugnant today is the unrepentant nostalgia for western hegemony that has not only gripped many prominent Anglo-American leaders and opinion-makers but also several servile Asian politicians, NGOs and columnists writing as cheer leaders of neo-colonialism, who strive to see Asia through the narrow angle of protecting western colonial interests, leaving unexamined the historical memory and the collective experiences of Asian peoples during the dark period of western colonial rule.

Colonialism and foreign occupation constitute crimes against humanity. They represent some of the most serious violations of national sovereignty of states and breach of international law, and in almost all colonial territories in Asia, Africa, North and South America horrendous crimes against humanity have been committed by the occupying colonial powers. The perpetrators have yet to be held accountable and brought to book under international law for these genocidal crimes. The Nuremberg and Tokyo War Crimes type Trials have yet to be staged to bring western colonial crimes to book.

Japan rejected the Western Theory of Manifest Destiny

Japan was not prepared to accept the freezing of the World Order based on colonialism and making it the Status Quo that could not be challenged or changed except at the risk of being branded as committing crimes against peace. Japan led the world in rejecting the western theory of Manifest Destiny which held that the United States was destined—by God—to expand its dominion and spread democracy and capitalism across the entire North American continent and there after the Asia – Pacific.

Japanese leaders have unfortunately paid the supreme penalty for their defiance of the West. They were brought before Tribunals which in the words of their own American judges were nothing but ‘ high grade lynch mobs’. In a sense these Tribunals were nothing but ‘ Kangaroo Courts’.

A survey of Courts set up by colonial authorities all over the world in European colonies to try freedom fighters, whether they be black, brown, yellow or even white, shows a remarkable consistency in the manipulation of justice to serve political ends of colonial rulers.

Victor’s Justice was what was served to those who had fought for freedom of their people and were unfortunate to be defeated and then be brought before courts accused of committing crimes against peace, humanity and war crimes.

The International Military Tribunal for the Far East (also known as the Tokyo Trials) was a larger and more sophisticated manifestation of Kangaroo Court type trials held in European colonies during the last 500 years.

The majority of Judges in the Tokyo Trials were European though the theater of war was exclusively Asian. In excluding Asians from the panel of Judges bar three out of the eleven judges the authorities displayed a crass colonial attitude of contempt and insensitivity to Asian claims for equality and like treatment. It was imperfect Justice in its most virulent form.

Only one Judge had the spine and moral backbone to challenge the legitimacy of the Trial. He was the legal luminary Justice Radhabinod Pal (India). In his 1, 235 page landmark dissent he condemned the trial as unjust and unreasonable, contributing nothing to lasting peace.

In Sri Lanka the rebels who fought in freedom struggles in 1818 and 1848 were executed and the entire communities in rebel controlled territories were subject to vicious reprisals e.g. Uva- Wellassa (1818) and Matale (1848) that were not very different to what happened to the innocent civilians in Lidice in Nazi occupied Czechoslovakia in 1942.

Former Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara made the following observation in 1995 “ Many Westerners act as if Human Rights are their moral ace in the hole, until their abysmal record in Asia is cited, and their position collapses like a pack of cards. Pointing out their hypocrisy does not deter the Americans, however. They blunder on badgering Asian Governments ”

Ceylon opposed isolation of Japan

The defeat of Japan in 1945 was only a Pyrrhic victory for the British, the French and the Dutch. Within a decade they lost their Asian Empire. Nevertheless, many Western nations demanded payment for reparations for damages caused during the war.

J.R. Jayewardene (then Ceylon’s Finance Minister) was outspoken at the San Francisco Peace Treaty Conference in 1951 in opposing the isolation of Japan. He called for Japan's re-integration into the international community, without imposing harsh punishment by way of reparations. The two other men who were closely associated with J.R. Jayewardene's historic speech, were the then Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake (who gave instructions to J.R. Jayewardene to toe the line as preached by the Buddha -

"Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love; this is the eternal rule.") and Sir Susantha Fonseka , then Ceylon’s first Ambassador to Japan (who was an ardent supporter of the Japanese cause, and even the influence behind the government’s decision not to ask for war compensation)

De-colonize Asian minds and show gratitude to Japan

The challenge before fellow Asians is to de-colonize our minds and look at Japan’s conduct before and during the Second World War afresh. Though Japan eventually lost the war its military effort was not in vain. It substantially weakened and demoralised the western countries then in occupation of large tracts of Asia, such as Britain, France, Netherlands, Portugal and the US, that they were forced to quit Asia in next to no time.

It is political correctness and revelations of Japan’s conduct in war-related atrocities during the Second World War that prevent Japan from being given due credit for its unique contribution towards hastening the liberation of Asia from western colonial rule.

Tragically today the legacy of Japan’s heroic contributions and sacrifices as the first Asian country that stood up and fought to drive out European colonialism from Asia in the 20th century, is seldom acknowledged, rarely celebrated, and hardly mentioned as a form of thanksgiving.

It is never too late to show Asia’s gratitude to Japan and re-write the historical narrative.

Senaka Weeraratna