

Sri Lanka's Independence – a beneficiary of Japan's entry to the Second World War which sealed the fate of European Colonialism in Asia

(Lankaweb, posted on February 2nd, 2017)

Senaka Weeraratna

Sri Lanka together with several other Asian countries owe much in winning their freedom, to Japan's entry to the Second World War and the resulting chain of events that sealed the fate of European colonialism in Asia.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian Prime Minister, 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.

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 the interplay of both external and internal factors.

Today, there is a great turn around in Historiography in respect to the role of Japan in the Second World War. Japan no longer has a pariah status or subject to isolation because of its conduct in the war. In fact, except in a couple of Far Eastern nations, Japan is increasingly gaining acceptance and recognition in much of Asia for being the catalyst in igniting the relatively dormant Asian Independence movements.

Nehru himself refused to take part in the San Francisco Peace Treaty Conference held in 1951 on several specified grounds and declared that Japan has done no wrong to India for India to seek an apology and reparations from Japan. India's sympathies beginning with Subash Chandra Bose and Judge Radhabinod Pal (*the only dissenting Judge in the Tokyo War Crimes Trial*) have always been with Japan. J.R. Jayewardene from Ceylon made a resounding plea for Japan citing the Buddha's insightful words that 'Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love; this is the eternal law.'

Asia's leaders and Historians now see a direct and incontrovertible connection between the Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour and Western Colonial bases in Asia, and the subsequent success of the independence movements which drew inspiration from Japan's courage to take on the West and liberate Asian colonies. Japan more than any other Asian country was responsible for sealing the fate of European colonialism in the Orient.

Historiography and the narrative on who won Independence for India in 1947 is also rapidly changing with an increasing number of writers prepared to give credit to Netaji Subash Chandra Bose, Indian National Army and Japan for the eventual liberation of India, while conceding to Mahatma Gandhi and his followers due respect for their noble and sustained efforts in seeking freedom from British colonial rule.

New Book

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.

Fear of another Indian Mutiny

Though Japan lost in 1945, the legacy of Subhas Chandra Bose endured to stir the Indian masses and soldiers of the British Indian Army and ratings of the Royal Indian Navy to mutiny following the trial of the INA Officers at the Red Fort. It was the fear of such a Mutiny on a scale bigger than the Indian Mutiny in 1857, that convinced the British that it was time to quit India, and Burma and Ceylon within a few months.

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.

External factors

Mainstream writings on the Independence movement in British occupied Ceylon have so far failed to account for the external factors that contributed to advancement of the date of independence.

A study of colonial history of Ceylon shows clearly that local Kings have sought external help to end foreign occupation of parts of Ceylon. Several Kings of Kandy had contacts with the Dutch finally leading to the Treaty of 1638 signed in Kandy where the Dutch undertook to assist the Kandyan Kingdom under King Rajasinghe the Second to expel the Portuguese which was successfully achieved in 1658.

Likewise the Kings of Kandy solicited the assistance of the British Empire towards the end of the 18th century to end Dutch occupation of Ceylon. This was achieved in 1796.

The purpose of this paper is to show that external factors again contributed substantially to end British occupation of Ceylon finally leading to independence in 1948.

To remain oblivious to these external factors and extend credit exclusively to the locals on the ground that they were ‘Freedom Fighters’ is an exercise in fantasy. There were no authentic freedom fighters in Ceylon after 1848. The last shot for freedom from colonial rule was fired in Matale in 1848 during the second war of independence (also called the Matale Rebellion).

The succeeding generations yearning for freedom produced marvelous orators, letter writers, pen pushers and even collaborators who preferred British colonial rule to continue rather than handing over the country to the locals. Several were quite happy to accept knighthoods and other perks, and co – exist with the colonial administration. There was no fight in them compared to what we have seen in warriors such as Keppetipola Disawe, Gongalegoda Banda, Puran Appu or even earlier in Kings such as Sitavaka Rajasinghe,

Mayadunne, Veediya Bandara (son in law of Buvanekabahu the 7th), Wimaladharmasuriya I, Senerath and Rajasinghe the Second, among others.

Our then local leaders pursued ‘ Constitutional Reform’ and not total independence though armed resistance e.g. Indonesia, or even large scale civil disobedience movements e.g. India. They were far removed from the type of fight and determination we have seen in other Asian nationalist leaders who fought against Western domination of Asia such as Hideki Tojo (Japan), Subhas Chandra Bose (India), Mao Tse Tung (China), Ho Chi Minh (Vietnam), Sukarno (Indonesia), and Aung San (Burma). These Asian freedom fighters and patriots preferred to use the only language that the West really understood and respected i.e. force of arms.

Except for Angarika Dharmapala, the freedom movement in Ceylon never produced a single leader of repute who enjoyed widespread support and admiration overseas for speaking out and engaging in battle for the liberation of Asia.

Historiography – a neglected field in Sri Lanka

Ceylon was very fortunate in gaining independence in 1948 despite not having fought in the real sense of the word to rid the country of foreign occupation. It is soldiers from other Asian countries e.g. Japan, who primarily made blood sacrifices to fight western domination of Asia during the Second World War. We were beneficiaries of these sacrifices and battles. We have to acknowledge this support from fellow Asians at some point in time.

Historiography in Sri Lanka is lagging behind the rest of the world. It is a neglected field. In respect to the narrative relating to the Second World War, our Historians have been merely echoing foreign perspectives and self – serving interpretations instead of carving out a separate original and independent path of research and writing.

It is time that we learn to look at historical events not from the angle of the colonizer but from the angle of those who have resisted foreign occupation both within and outside Sri Lanka.

Senaka Weeraratna