

Feature

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War crimes of 'both sides' or war crimes of all sides: Oslo film discussion stirs thoughts

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After a full house show of Beate Arnestad's documentary on exiled Sinhala and Eezham Tamil journalists on Thursday in Oslo, Norwegian journalist Sverre Tom Radøy leading the discussion, prompted British journalist Frances Harrison talking on the sufferings of the civilians to elucidate on 'war crimes of both sides' and particularly those of the LTTE. Forced recruitment and preventing the civilians from going to the side of the Sri Lanka Army were the war crimes of the LTTE, Ms. Harrison specified. Confining the crimes to a paradigm 'both sides' is a tactic of the international architects of the war to circumvent their crimes and responsibility. Made to naively believe that justice would come from the very architects, the affected Tamils have failed in focussing their demand on the accountability of all sides that had committed the crimes, commented an observer to the show.



Frances Harrison, the former BBC Correspondent for Sri Lanka interviewed by Norwegian Journalist Sverre Tom Radøy



Bashana Abeywardane, the former chief editor of Hiru weekly

However, speaking after Ms. Harrison, exiled Sinhala journalist Bashana Abeywardane enlightened the audience on the topic.

The way the war was conducted was an international experiment of a war paradigm. It was meant to make a struggling people surrender, by breaking their morale through starvation, shelling and massacre. The paradigm earlier tried in Guatemala is now deployed in Turkey, Bhashana said, pinpointing the responsibility of the world Establishments in the evil design of the war in the island.

When such was the intention of leading Establishments in the world, prompting perception towards a localised equation, 'war crimes of both sides,' by highlighting the 'crimes' of the LTTE, serves only for deviating focus of attention away from revelations like that of Beate raising larger questions, the observer of the show in Oslo opined.

A larger question actually arises on the modes operandi of a number of world Establishments that had lead the chronic local issue into a genocide paradigm through local agents. They continue tilting the balance of any investigations and justice too, as they had tilted the balance of the war earlier, the observer further said.

Commenting on the equation 'war crimes of both sides,' a leading Tamil Nadu politician reminded of a saying in Tamil, "Yaanaikku paanai sariyaay poachchu:" An elephant and a pot are equal (because they resemble each other in shape).

The affected civilians seeking justice are not from 'both sides'.

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War crimes of all sides, beginning from the USA mobilising many countries to Rajapaksa claiming that he fought India's war, are increasingly coming on record. China has to explain of its arms used in the war, while Russia has to explain how cluster bombs of its markings that took the life of a large number of civilians reached the SL Army. Norway's responsibility has been brought out in its own report. The Co-Chairs who called for the surrender of civilians to the SL military have to take responsibility for the crimes committed on civilians in captivity.

With all the skeletons in the cupboard, officials of the USA last month discouraged civil groups in Jaffna from expecting war crimes investigation coming from the UNHRC session in March.

The US court decision dismissing cases of the war-crimes-accused on grounds of 'immunity' and the UN Secretary General mocking at the very idea of indicting any for the war crimes by naming Shavendra Silva for the UN appointment of international peace-keeping, show where the trends lead to.

There is no sufficient pressure or request from the affected people for resolutions on war crime investigation, the visiting US officials told the civil representatives of gagged Eezham Tamils in the island.

Amidst demand of Tamils all over the world and a unanimous resolution in the Tamil Nadu State assembly, the observation coming from the US State Department officials at an informal meeting in Jaffna may look funny, but it reminds the Eezham Tamils of their failure in not targeting the ultimate elements responsible for the crimes.

If sparing the masters and not sparing the masters mean the same in expecting justice, expose all and at least put the demand on record as inspiration for humanity, commented diaspora political circles, urging the people of Tami Nadu also to get awakened to a struggle against 'war crimes of all sides'.

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Sverre Tom Radøy, journalist in Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) and the author of the book "Reiser på Sri Lanka - Norges øy i tropene" (2008).

Meanwhile, anchoring the Oslo film show on Thursday, Norwegian journalist Radøy said that awareness in Norway on the happenings in the island of Sri Lanka and media coverage was poor, despite Norway's involvement in the island.

According to Norwegian minister Erik Solheim, since the times of Vikings, a major foreign role played by Norway was in Sri Lanka. He said that in 2006 and repeated that in 2008. Norway spent billions of Kroners in this prestigious venture. But one year after the CFA, it was already on its way to the archives of peace processes in the island, and the Norwegian media didn't take interest, Radøy said.

On the pathetic state of awareness among the Norwegian public, Radøy said, "The knowledge about the conflict was so poor among the students whom I met in 2008 that they thought the matter of Tamil Tigers was something the World Wildlife

Foundation was concerned about."

Sri Lanka doesn't have nuclear weapons or oil, nor it is the birthplace of West's religions, Radøy reasoned for the disinterest, adding, "We don't have any collective feelings of guilt as we have for the Jews after the Holocaust."

The largest five media houses of Norway didn't field their own journalists to measure the situation in the island during the critical years 2002 – 2006. Only after Tsunami in 2004 we went as a herd, and again in 2006 we followed Erik Solheim on his last journey to the island, Radøy said.

"We journalists normally don't trust these politicians. So, why did we trust them in the 'most important' role Norway played outside in a country since the times of the Vikings," Radøy wondered.

But, it is thought-provoking that there had to happen a bloodbath to get our attention on Sri Lanka, he said.

However, Radøy's introduction portraying the island as a "colourful mosaic" of ethnicities and his citation to a professor in the island on genetic admixture making all 'Sri Lankans' as hybrids, may be in line with a 'multicultural' theme of solution envisaged in the West, but it doesn't justify the historical, geographical and political realities that were long evolving nations in the island, Eezham Tamil viewers of the programme commented.

Radøy magnifying the difference between Sinhala and Tamil languages, as something more than the difference between Sinhala and Norwegian, is also not correct, academics viewing the programme said. Both are closely related languages, even though the scripts evolved differently. Perhaps Radøy might have been influenced by the stereotype Aryan–Dravidian story of the Orientalists. But if at all there is any point of comparison that should be understood in Norway, it is the fact that even when there were close affinities in language and ethnicity, Norwegians chose to become a separate independent nation from the Danish and the Swedish, the academics pointed out.

Some of the observations made by Radøy on the colonial legacy were stereotype, and were of the colonial-Orientalist perception that had conceived Ceylon and had caused the legacy of conflict, Eezham Tamil viewers commented.

For instance Radøy was stereotype in telling that Tamils were the favourite of the British, while it was the Colombo-centric coastal Sinhalese who actually enjoyed that privilege and to whom the British transferred power, Eezham Tamil viewers pointed out, citing the assessment of ethnicities found in the Donoughmore Commission Report of 1928 on constitutional reforms.

But Radøy was magnanimous in admitting the injustice arising from the peace process of Norway.

100 years ago Norway was thankfully known outside of Western Europe, when new-born babies were named after the Norwegian Fridjof Nansen [for his contribution to peace in the Balkans]. Until recent times, Tamil houses had the picture of Erik Solheim and Tamil babies received the name Erik, a name from the Norwegian epics. But they might have now deleted that name from the registries, Radøy said.

"There had to be a bloodbath for we Norwegian journalists to get awakened in 2009. Then we sent our journalists directly. It was very late."

Beate Arnestad's contribution in making this documentary is that it reminds us not to forget the injustice, Radøy observed in introducing the documentary.



Beate Arnestad, the documentary film-maker, being interviewed by Sverre Tom Radøy.

The documentary "Silenced Voices – Tales of Sri Lankan Journalists in Exile," by award-winning Norwegian film maker Beate Arnestad was an impressive masterpiece on the plight of Sinhala and Eezham Tamil journalists set in the background of the happenings in the island and of the life of the journalists in exile, determined in their professional commitment in seeking justice.

The documentary featured the plight of Sonali Wikramatunge, wife of the slain founder and editor of Colombo-based Sunday Leader, her determination in seeking justice and her renewed vigour in making her heard through her own electronic media.

The documentary brought out the selfless commitment of Bashana Abeywardane and his wife Sharmila Logeswaram to their ideology, their historic contribution in bringing out war crimes evidence to mainstream media (Channel 4) through Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS), and their concern towards fellow journalists, despite their own difficulties.

The film courageously featured the services and plight of A. Lokeesan, the only independent correspondent within the battlefield who brought out reliable reports to the English-speaking world, despite the name of his media is considered a 'taboo' for citation by many. Lokeesan is the only Tamil journalist featured in the documentary.



Exiled journalists A. Lokeesan, the TamilNet wartime correspondent in Vanni and Bashana Abeywardane of Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS)

On what Lokeesan achieved as a war correspondant, a tribute in the spirit of media comradeship came from The Hindu's B. Muralidhar Reddy, writing in Frontline in June 2009:

"Most important was the fact that we had interference-free access to the Internet, including TamilNet, the website perceived to be pro-LTTE and based somewhere in Europe. Within the constraints of Internet time available, and not-unexpected problems of connectivity and speed in a war zone, there was just enough time to read and absorb the reports on the website before sending news dispatches to our headquarters. No questions were asked. It must be said that the 'journalistic team' associated with TamilNet did a marvellous job of relaying the scenes of the last hours of Eelam War IV as they unfolded."

Muralidhar Reddy was on the opposite side of the battlefield, moving with the 58 division of the Sri Lanka Army during the last days of the war.

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The documentary film-maker Beate Arnestad, speaking to the audience after the show, said that the inhuman massacres that had taken place could possibly be ranked as the worst of the kind of abuses that had taken place in this century.

"I have a feeling, that it became possible because nearly the entire Tamil population was tagged as terrorists and the whole world ignored them and left them to sail in their own waters," Beate's observation targeted the abuse of the 'war on terror' paradigm.

When commented by Radøy that unlike the usual documentaries in which academics and hard facts are presented, her documentary featured close and emphatic portraits of the journalists involved, she replied "The way I work is by witnessing those who live through the problems and by bringing attachment to the actual material. This way, I can reach a broader audience than what academics and statistics could say."

True to her words, many of the viewers captivated by the powerful presentation earnestly felt that it should be presented in Sinhala, Tamil and if possible in some other South Asian languages as well, in order to reach the masses of the region where the impact could find its best expression by bringing in positive political action.

Chronology:

08.09.12 [Arnestad's 'Silenced Voices' documentary gains mom..](#)

11.02.12 [War crimes of 'both sides' or war crimes of all si..](#)

24.01.12 [Award winning filmmaker presents documentary on ex..](#)

04.11.10 [TamilNet wartime correspondent from Vanni reaches ..](#)

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