

Tamil school student assaulted on Sri Lankan train by racist gang

Our correspondent
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Hundreds of Tamil students of the Colombo Hindu College boycotted classes on March 23 in protest against a physical attack in broad daylight on a fellow student by a gang of racist thugs. After being restrained by school authorities, the students gave up plans for a street demonstration but decided to wear black armbands as a mark of protest. The incident, which is symptomatic of the atmosphere of Sinhala chauvinism being stirred up the Sri Lankan government and the media, also provoked angry reactions from parents and teachers.

Mahalingam Gobikrishna, 18, had been travelling to school by early morning train on March 22 from Negombo, north of Colombo, to Mount Lavinia to the south. He put his bag in a luggage rack and as more passengers got on the train he was pushed further away from it. "On the way I heard a commotion taking place within the compartment but I did not understand what it was about. My bag was only contained my school text books, exercise books and a lunch box," Gobikrishna told WSWs reporters.

"When this train came to the Colpetty station, just one stop before my destination, I went to collect my school bag. When I pulled it out from the rack I found it to be open and all my books fell out of my bag. Then a gang of people started to assault me—to kick and punch me. They shouted at me, 'you are the ones who plant bombs in the trains' and continued attacking me.

"I realised only later that someone became suspicious of my bag, opened it and found my Tamil books in it. They also tampered with my lunch box, which only had some string hoppars [a Sri Lankan staple food] as my snacks. Then realising that the bag belonged to a Tamil student the gang waited for me to pick it up so that they could assault me.

"They did not allow me to pick up my books thrown

out of my bag. Instead they picked them up and tore them to pieces, calling me 'a Tiger' all the time. I told those who were assaulting me that I was a student. I also showed them the school emblem on my uniform. They did not pay any attention to what I said. Women and some other passengers protested against the attack and appealed to them not to hit an innocent school student. But the assault continued.

"When I tried to get down at my station, Bambalapitiya, they blocked my way. I struggled to get out. They pushed me out of the train while it was picking up speed. I fell on the platform face down. Due to this assault and the fall on the platform my left cheek started swelling. Ten years ago I underwent surgery for hernia. This attack has made a serious impact on my entire body."

When Gobikrishna finally reached his school he was treated there by the St. John Ambulance Service and told by the principal to file a complaint to the Colpetty police station. Not only did the police fail to show any interest in the complaint or sympathy for the student, but they began to interrogate the teacher who had accompanied Gobikrishna with a barrage of questions. "Are you from Jaffna? Are you supporting him? Don't you understand the threat of bomb explosions by the Tigers? Do you also approve them?" and so on. Only with great reluctance did the police record the complaint.

The line of questioning, which was clearly aimed at intimidating the teacher, was not accidental. In response to a number of bombings in Colombo believed to have been carried out by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the police and military have intensified their harassment and intimidation of Tamils. The security forces routinely stop and interrogate anyone thought to be Tamil.

Hundreds have been accused of being LTTE supporters and detained without trial, often for years, under the country's security laws.

But such anti-Tamil racism is far from all-pervasive. In addition to those on the train who had protested against the attack, Gobikrishna also explained: “The Sinhalese school students who used to travel with me from Negombo to schools in Colombo, and left the train before I did, got very angry when they heard about the attack on me. They wanted me to point out the attackers and told me that they would teach them a good lesson.”

Gobikrishna's mother told the WSWs: “I must thank God for saving my son from getting crushed in between the railway tracks when they pushed him out of the moving train. My worry is about the violation of the rights of a school student, whether he is Tamil or Sinhalese, which should be respected. But in this case they utterly failed to take this point of view. After this attack and the threat, I am scared to send my son to school from Negombo. I thought of finding a place for him close to the school but it costs money.”

When the students at the Hindu College heard about the incident, hundreds left their classes spontaneously and surrounded the principal's office. Students called for a street demonstration but the principal prevailed on them to call it off, saying that he had taken all necessary measures.

Hundreds of parents and teachers attended an emergency meeting called by the School Development Board of the Hindu College and expressed their anger and indignation over the racist attack. Some in the audience called for broad based protests, recalling widespread student strikes in Jaffna earlier in the year over the arbitrary detention by the police of two school students. Again the principal intervened, saying such action was neither possible nor necessary in Colombo. He added that the Deputy Inspector General of Police for the Colombo region assured him that such incidents would not take place in future.

But over the next few days, several attacks against Tamils were reported in Colombo area alone.



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