

Peace: Understanding our Reality!

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[Published in Pravada, vol 3 no.11, march/april 1995,pp.5-9, during the negotiation between the newly elected government & the LTTE]

Peace is something that most of us earnestly desire, and none more so than the ordinary people of this country, who one way or the other, have suffered the most. Yet the path is so perilous and the cost of wrong conceptualisation, shoddy groundwork and wrong decisions most tragic for those who have the least ability to influence decisions made. It is this aspect of the matter which causes the greatest concern. Do the government, its negotiators and peace activists possess an adequate understanding of the problem and its ramifications? Presentations on the subject in the South have been mainly to do with legal, economic and constitutional aspects, and not least the impact on foreign relations, in particular the role of India. Several of these have been very enlightened and have gone on to question the constricting role of Sinhalese nationalist ideology and of the disastrous politics based on it. Yet these have generally not gone to the heart of the matter, which if we do, raises several awkward moral questions. This is the difference between talking about our own conflict and that in say Afghanistan. The former brings into question our own sense of responsibility as well as challenging our record of action and inaction over the past twenty years and more.

If these moral questions are not discussed we will fail to understand the very deep seated alienation of the Tamil community and the frightening repressive machinery that has been erected within this community, supposedly as the only means of resisting state oppression. The failure to understand one would also mean an inability to understand the other, except to be awed by its destructive potential from time to time.

Take the matter of well attested removal by the forces of hundreds of Tamil civilians from refugee camps in East who then disappeared; The bombing and shelling of civilian areas in the North with no evident rational purpose, leaving the civilians to believe that they were the intended victims; and the Welikade prison massacre of July 1983. These cannot be put down to spur of the moment reflex action, but stemmed to a large extent from consciously articulated state policy. Without going into a catalogue of alleged discrimination, we pose one question: **As regards state policy, what does the Mahaveli Authority's 'Weli Oya' settlement signify, not just taking into account the Tamil inhabitants driven away, but also the not less hapless Sinhalese civilians settled there to lead a grim existence? ([See Special Report No. 5](#))**

Until recently there has been very little, if any, public discussion about these in South. If raised at all, it was mostly to be then buried away as collateral effects of conflict. The human aspect of this violence is seldom faced up to, how it has scarred a people to the point of legitimizing a growth such as the LTTE.

At present, assessments of the problem commonly held by people in decision making circles, negotiators and the peace lobby could be dangerously complacent. The jarring facts are skirted. The LTTE is treated as a classic rebel group wanting maximum advantage at negotiations, but eventually willing to compromise like most rebel groups. After all guerilla leaders are supposed to mellow and want to settle down once they are about 40! Had not

Prabakaran has reached 40 last year? Are not after all LTTE leaders sending their offspring to leading Mission schools? Surely, they are administering Jaffna very well and would like the opportunity to administer it better once sufficient progress has been made in the peace process to start sending in the resources for reconstruction. Can the LTTE after all go on resisting international opinion?

Indeed, there were very similar expectations in 1987 and 1990 and something went tragically wrong. Securing the peace therefore demands greater attention to the internal complexities of the problem.

Some grim realities

The 15th November 1994 issue of **'Ulakath Thamilar'** published by the World Tamil Movement in Toronto reproduced the speech made by LTTE leader Prabakaran on 'Great Heroes Day', 27th November 1989, undoubtedly on centrally directed instructions. It said:

"Moreover, where Prabakaran is concerned, Prabakaran is not an individual. He is the representative of a nation. Should Prabakaran become a traitor to Tamil Eelam, as did Amirthalingam earlier, he too would deserve to be shot dead. Therefore as we celebrate Great Heroes Day, traitors should also be extirpated from the midst of the people"

The special issue of the journal was ostensibly meant to glorify young men and women, often children, whose lives were sacrificed for the LTTE's cause. The editorial stated:

"Upon the 27th day of November a youngster [Lt. Shankar, the first martyr] closed his eyelids after uttering the words: "We will not see the dawn [that will see an end to the sufferings of the Tamils] unless we spill our blood and pay the price with our life".

"Here birth and death have become the raw materials of freedom. On this day martyrs by their thousands await in their tombs with eyelids closed to see their dream of a free Tamil Eelam come true, and to watch the flag of their nation, hoisted by their Leader, fluttering in the breeze".

Such stirring stuff make strange companions for other items in the journal the sum of which brings out a horrifying and vulgar reality showing the hypocrisy and cynicism in the whole business.

There is a full page advertisement by CASH EXPRESS of Toronto saluting the martyrs of Eelam, and a whole heap of others catering to the demands of a consumer society, the last thought in whose mind is to offer themselves as martyrs. **'Vijaya's Silk'** of Mississauga invites young maidens to their 'enchanted silk dresses, the latest in fashion'. Priests, a disciple of Sai Baba and match making bureaus proffer their services, along with estate agents, grocers, movers, driving instructors and immigration lawyers. There are then birthday greeting for Canadian born Tamil children inserted by relatives, calling for divine blessings so that these children may grow, 'acquire proficiency in all skills and enjoy a long and prosperous life'.

Against this, what lies is behind the 'martyrs' being saluted whose reality is so far removed from Cash Express & Vijaya's Silk and whose life is anything but long and prosperous? They are youngsters cornered by their environment, the violence of the state and by the calculations

and propaganda of the LTTE. Methods of recruiting children are most obnoxious. **The current recruitment drive in the East is not through political meetings and publications as in the early phase of the struggle where several groups put forward their alternatives and questions could be raised. It is but through showing videos and pictures of heroic action by the LTTE and the aftermath of atrocities by the forces to young children and thus rousing their emotions. Those giving their momentary consent are quickly carried away. These are done under conditions where even during negotiations for peace, elders in Eastern villages cannot ask questions about the purpose of this exercise.**

There are of course no videos about children recruited in the past who had become complete wrecks after being sent into villages to massacre Muslims and Sinhalese, including women and children; or of children with limbs blown and traumatised after being used in wasteful sledgehammer tactics in attempts to breach the defences of Sri Lankan army camps. **Why political options were repeatedly spurned in preference to this massive physical and mental death are questions almost never asked.**

What we are witnessing is in effect the very elaborate ritual of a religion requiring child-sacrifice. The sacrificial victims are the children of the Tamil poor in the North-East, carried away after being administered narcotics in the form of action videos, while their elders have no choice but to watch in silence.

Around this ritual the life of an atomised, consumerised Tamil society flows on, buying, selling, marrying, transferring cash, going abroad, crossing borders, immigration lawyers and so on. How did a society which once attracted considerable youthful idealism in the cause of Tamil liberation collapse into a state of vulgar barbarity, leave alone insensitivity, towards their own fellows?

Behind the LTTE's actions

Different segments of Tamil society through their nationalist perceptions see and identify certain aspects of the LTTE as representing their interests. But they are not prepared to see the LTTE's politics with its dynamism in toto and thus identify its destructive core. For certain sections there is no need for that exercise as they could opt out when convenient. On the other hand for the rural poor and the children who are living in the North-East, the whole affair is a deadly snare.

Those who compare the LTTE with the ANC and PLO and expect that peace is a matter of compromise, patience, effort and dangling the right carrots, must look at certain other aspects. There were several organisations involved in the South African and Palestinian struggles. Moreover, the ANC and PLO were broad based organisations which were also in conflict with others in aims and strategies. The space for debate was not totally closed. This enabled them to be sensitive to realities. It also allowed them to compromise as well as to be creative in handling realities. There was always a real possibility that things could go wrong for them. But they never raised their own movement to sacred status, call all others traitors and go on to annihilate them during the struggle.

The LTTE through internal terror as well its narrow nationalist rhetoric coupled to a militaristic approach, institutionalised a culture of hatred and death to the extent that it is unable to come out of its suicidal course. A unique brand of personal loyalty to the leader and

to the movement, imposed through an oath together with continuous brain washing is the a hallmark of the LTTE.

The LTTE's cause may be unattainable and utterly destructive, and perhaps it sees no room for manoeuvre for all that it has done. But it has never been in confusion about what it ought to do in a given situation. Its mind has been very clear about how it should maximize advantage from the confusion and opportunism of others- whether state powers, intellectuals, peace makers, religious leaders or others.

The dilemmas of peace

The peace process currently underway comes from the heart of the people of the South, and is an opportunity not to be mislaid.

It must be pursued even if the chances of immediate success are low. It would seem that so much hope has been placed on the success of presents negotiations and the continuance of the ceasefire, that little thought is given to alternative and more likely scenarios. When things do go wrong, the elite who influenced decisions and are responsible for misjudgments could shrug their shoulders and walk away to other gainful pursuits. But who is going to be responsible for the ordinary people who will bear the brunt of misjudgments? This unchanging propensity to go on repeating the same blunders every few years is among the biggest intellectual and moral failures in the South.

Any dilution of democracy in the South, any perceived attacks on free expression, will work to the detriment of the peace process. It must be remembered that the main constraint on the LTTE is the overwhelming desire for peace on the part of the Tamil people.

But how much the opening in the South is deeply rooted is another question. The people who became cynical about the UNP regime urgently needed a change. They had begun to suspect every aspect of UNP's policies which also created conditions in which the whole rationale for the war arose. The PA leadership had taken a very positive approach on the ethnic issue during the election campaigns, which was unparalleled in post independence politics. But to translate the positive sentiments into corresponding actions and produce adequate results needs to overcome several obstacles ahead. As we mentioned earlier, the LTTE's politics or for that matter the dominant Tamil politics is not going to help in removing such obstacles.

There are Tamil opinion makers constantly trying to push the message that ultimately the Sinhalese cannot be trusted and any Sinhalese government will betray the Tamils. They do not acknowledge the healthy change in the South, which is still a nascent plant. Instead of taking responsibility to help it to grow to maturity, they would do everything to frustrate and destroy it. Should the peace process fail, they would be the happiest to boast about their prophetic prescience in 'having always been right about the Sinhalese'. Their Sinhalese counterparts are also waiting in the sidelines to complement them.

With the prospect of renewed war not to be taken lightly, serious thought must be given to how the army is going to respond to contingencies. As things stand there is the very serious danger that if conflict were to resume, an angry army would again take it out on Tamil civilians in the East, while bombs and shells rain on Jaffna. Then much of what was gained by the initiatives taken would be lost. After all these years of tragedy there has been no frank

appraisal accompanied by institutional changes to ensure that the forces do not respond according to the agenda determined by the LTTE.

A large share of the responsibility in securing the peace lies also with the Tamil elite. It is their responsibility to understand and renounce the hypocrisy and double standards that legitimise the LTTE brand of nationalism. We should stop talking and behaving as though all what this politics has made the ordinary people of the North-East pay in blood, ruin, mental trauma, torture and pervasive insecurity is in order to enable a class of Tamils living elsewhere to move with 'dignity and security'. Why all these people have died, why are so many innocent young being involuntarily taken away from their parents to bear arms to sustain this cause needs to be answered. We also need to be sensitive to the perceptions of ordinary Sinhalese people who also have their experience of the LTTE. When the Tamil elite are seen giving credence to unreasonable demands of the LTTE, it helps to reinforce discredited Sinhalese nationalist positions.

We also need to get away from the notion that we could go on blaming the State and the Sinhalese while pretending that Tamils being the victims, persistent atrocious behaviour by their so called leaders is of no relevance. That could only give us some perverse pleasure in bringing out the worst in others while inexorably destroying ourselves.

The Tamil middle-class in the South

An important and complementary role in legitimising the LTTE is played by the urban Tamil middle class in the South with their influential connections. Their attitudes, though explicable by their experience of communal violence, are nevertheless largely irresponsible. A common sentiment coming from members of this group is that they can now hold their heads high and live in safety in the South because of the LTTE. They are totally insensitive to the killing of thousands of Tamil civilians in the East after June 1990 as a direct result of the LTTE's tactics, whom moreover the LTTE did nothing to protect. Indeed, life in

the North-East remains so insecure to this day that those with the means try to get their children over to Colombo. Was all this death, loss and insecurity in the North -East, including the death of the young LTTE cadre and suicide operatives, just to ensure the safety and dignity of Tamils living in the South? Indeed among the aims of the LTTE was to create insecurity for Tamils in the South so as to secure legitimacy for its notion of Eelam. If Tamils have remained unharmed in the South through all the bomb explosions and assassinations, it is not merely because of fear among the Sinhalese. There are articulate sections advocating a harsh, unrestrained approach to the Tamil problem and Tamil security in the South remains tenuous. The reasons for Tamil security lie far from the LTTE and not least owing to a large number of Sinhalese advocating restraint and making an open reappraisal of the past. It was the regimes in power with their omissions and commissions, rather than the people, who perpetuated the legacy of communal violence.

Of course the authoritarianism and the Sinhalese chauvinist positions of the Southern polity, which treated its own people with cynicism, while being insensitive to their real fears and insecurity legitimized and nurtured the destructive politics of this kind. The ultimate outcome of this elite politics leads to a competition as to who is worse; ie. the state or the LTTE- and in that game people of both sides have become mere pawns. How the LTTE uses the weakness of Southern politics created an illusion that the LTTE as a strong movement.

In negotiating all these contradictions, the LTTE's messages are selectively modulated with different things meant for different people. Truth can never be permitted to become a virtue. Those who try to analyse the LTTE's statements issued in English or the much circulated interviews broadcast over the BBC Tamil Service are likely to get it all wrong. On the other hand what comes out in the Tamil publications are fairly explicit such as in 'Ulakath Thamilar' quoted above. Moreover almost every 18 year old from Jaffna or the ordinary man in the street when questioned by those whom they trust would readily admit that the 'people are eager for peace, but peace would not come! Yet few in the peace lobby or in decision making circles take them seriously.

Paralysis of the Tamil community

What has been sketched above is just one particular aspect of what is happening to the Tamils today. Even if it were only a tendency, in any healthy community groups and individuals would have come forward to raise questions. But more than just a tendency it has become an institution, set against a total paralysis of public opinion. One could understand powerless ordinary people living under terror for not wanting to see the unpleasant side of things. Then what about the intelligentsia? Of course they know quite a bit, and many of them are familiar with the nuances of LTTE literature. Some of them have taken a conscious decision to back the LTTE. Others see the good of the people through their personal career aims and security. From the BBC Tamil Service to Tamil journals published in this country are all largely biased towards promoting the assumptions of a decadent Tamil nationalism. Almost no alternative opinion gets through. There is nearly nothing to question the dangerous path along which the LTTE is driving the Tamils. Religious leaders and other Tamil intellectuals echo the LTTE in demanding the 'fundamental rights' of Tamils before political talks, but say nothing about the fundamental rights of Tamil children inveigled into carrying arms, or of children prevented from joining their parents in the South only because all children are regarded potential recruits

Initially the silence was imposed through selective assassination and mass imprisonment. From mid- 1986 there has been a steady exodus of Tamils disillusioned with the politics, many of whom lapsed into silence abroad. Any active protest abroad declined sharply after the murder in Paris of Sabalingam. The LTTE had crossed a new threshold and had proved to itself that it could do this kind of thing in the West with impunity. Peace or no peace, the LTTE's arm continues to work in the West with mechanical precision. Changes of addresses and telephone numbers of its critics and opponents are continually monitored.

The institutionalisation of the LTTE's interest was greatly facilitated by the exodus to the West particularly from the Jaffna peninsula. Originally the center of the struggle, now 20 to 30% of its populations has migrated to the West. With more than 80,000 in Toronto alone, they command political influence as well as substantial government patronage. Their feelings are a mixture of guilt with other material fears. Among the latter is that of being deported back home in the event of peace after spending around rupees 10 lakhs going to the West. Few of them would like to put it in these terms, but peace at home does hold its horrors for them. The LTTE has used all this with great skill. By destroying other groups or branding them traitors, together with a generous spread of action videos and propaganda material, it has projected itself as the only saviour of Tamils at home- although whether it has ever been their saviour is most doubtful.

The South and the Sinhalese are systematically portrayed as enemies and oppressors with whom co-existence is deemed inconceivable. The benign and healthy changes in the South are

almost totally blacked out. Eelam, it is maintained is the only admissible solution from which the LTTE will never swerve. For the Tamil elite in the West, there is of course no fear of deportation. Yet the LTTE provided them with the exhilarating prospect of vicariously participating in images of Tamil valour, martial glory and suicidal determination so far from their drab world of material aspirations which compensate for alienation. For a modest contribution these expatriates enable captive children back home to throw away their life and expiate the devotion with which they cling to their own.

While the support for the LTTE by emigres from Jaffna is largely passive and in the way of contributions, the principal role in actively promoting the LTTE's cause abroad is played by articulate, highly educated and well connected Tamil emigres from Colombo. Their role is even less pardonable. They had seldom if ever been to Jaffna, and have no idea of how people live and die in the rural parts of the North-East. To them the LTTE's cause is a game as impersonal as it is exciting.

All these considerations go to determine the nexus between Jaffna society and the LTTE. It also largely determines the social class & age of the recruits and why recruitment in the East is so crucial for the LTTE. Key to the struggle today is the unquestioning material and moral support of the Jaffna expatriate community, the public relations of elite emigres often from Colombo, a global underworld network manned by intimates of the leadership from Jaffna involved in lucrative and controversial shipping operations & the smuggling of narcotics, and the disposable manpower culled mainly from the Rural North, East and the underclass in Jaffna.

Take the deadlock over the LTTE's demand that Pooneryn army camp be removed and not allowing civilians to travel through Pooneryn and Elephant Pass as long as the army is camped in these places. The issue has little to do with civilian interests, and if a negotiated solution is the desired result, it is hardly the thing over which to hold up talks on a political settlement.

From the experience of the recent past, whether the aftermath of Indo -Sri Lanka accord or during peace talks with the Premadasa regime the LTTE has shown a callous disregard for civilian interests. In that context removing a camp as a condition for talks will be looked by the Sinhalese populace at large and by the Army with suspicion, which is understandable. The army has its experience of what the LTTE did in June 1990 after the government obligingly dismantled some army camps. On the other hand ordinary Tamil people are having doubts about the sincerity and the ability of the Southern polity to evolve a political solution. This is due to their experience with post independence politics. Their interest lies in getting a political solution and utilising all the goodwill and openings in the South to achieve just and fair solution. Hence it is urgent that the LTTE starts on negotiating a political solution.

Of course the institutional inertia built in the state machinery due to past ideological manipulations will not wither away in the near future. During the negotiation for political solution taken a firm foot the demands which will matters day day today life of the people further pursued. The implementation of a political solution will face lot more obstacles and to remove and check them the Tamils and Sinhalese people who wants to build a new future for our next generation have to unite and work hard.