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The Suicide Cult

There had been several incidents of murder in Colombo of late, of which three were suicide bomb attacks by the LTTE which claimed several dozens of lives. On the eve of the presidential election, at 9.25 P.M. on 18th December, **President Kumaratunge** narrowly survived a suicide bomb attack. In a separate attack half an hour earlier, **Major General Lucky Algama**, who was viewed as one who would play an important role in the defence ministry in the event of a UNP victory, was killed. Although initially the killing of **Algama** was alleged to be the work of the PA, all subsequent evidence showed that it was a suicidal attack and so far no serious evidence has been produced by the UNP opposition to counter this. These two and the suicide attack opposite the Prime Minister's office on 5th January stemmed from the same well-tested political strategy that the LTTE has become master of. On the one hand, it will target any Tamil who rejects condemning the whole community to the suicidal war, which the LTTE is fated to fight, and works instead for a political solution. On the other hand, it will go on with suicidal attacks in the South to kill Sinhalese leaders and to

bring out the bestial element in man. Far more than its military strategies, these two elements make up the political thrust, which the LTTE is condemned to pursue. Not to fall into the trap requires almost super human restraint, clear perception and sound strategy. This holds not just for the Government, but also for civil society and non-governmental groups in general.

The night of 18th December when **President Kumaratunge** was attacked gave us an idea of what could have gone dangerously wrong. The fact that the President survived, and appealed to the country through her secretary to keep calm, as she ought to have done, helped to allay fears that there would be anarchy. These attacks were not by a group representing the Tamil people and wanting a bona-fide settlement to the problem. The LTTE believes that only anarchy in the South, a collapse of order and renewed communal violence against the Tamils will serve its ends.

A phenomenon which has institutionalised the suicide cult and is able to turn out an apparently inexhaustible supply of suicide bombers cannot be approached lightly. It requires much greater sensitivity in dealing with the ordinary Tamils.

But this is nowhere the priority today. When peace groups talk about confidence building, they hardly refer to the Tamil people, but rather to the LTTE. The President is on record saying that she would discuss anything with the LTTE short of a separate state. Why then feel so timid about conceding federalism which Tamil moderate opinion has demanded from the 1950s? Why such a laboured political package trying hard to give the impression that it is something short of what the Tamil people want? Are not both the President and the Leader of the Opposition giving the message that it is not the reasoned voice of Tamil moderation that counts, but rather, intractable extremism and suicide bombers? It is a needless complication of the problem.

The suicide cult involves a leader with such unbounded faith in himself and his cause, that he unflinchingly sends a stream of young Tamils into the flames of self-immolation. He will stop at nothing, and that needs to be understood. In this context, excluding the people and thinking about 'confidence building' between the LTTE and the Government is an almost cynical proposition that is totally out of place. [\[Top\]](#)

The Silencing of a Voice

The murder by a lone assassin with a gun of **Kumar Ponnambalam**, leader of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress on 5th January this year, has given rise to problems that did not arise with the murders of **Neelan Thiruchelvam**, **Sarojini Yogeswaran**, **A.Thangathurai** and several other Tamil leaders, nor with the attempted murder of **President Kumaratunge** and the murder of **General Algama**. **Kumar Ponnambalam** had been a part of that social ferment within the Tamil elite that spawned and sustained the politics of the LTTE. Its ultimate purpose - to unreasonably vilify, provoke and bring out the worst in the Sinhalese. This is done by harping on the very real suffering of the Tamils - often through the sheer callousness of the State - but, refusing to acknowledge the instrumentality of the LTTE in this or the role played by a segment in the Sinhalese polity which is also challenging the status quo. This is then used to argue that nothing good will come out of the Sinhalese.

To see **Kumar Ponnambalam** merely as an individual is to miss the point. Seeing his political career as simply opportunistic is also to miss the wood for the trees. If one goes into the past of individuals uncompromisingly backing the LTTE, one would very likely find

elements which the LTTE in theory finds far from congenial - others have been killed for much less. Among this group one finds a secretary to the ministry of labour under the UNP as well as a vice president of **Gamini Dissanayake's** trade union - the LJEWU, former central committee members of the EPRLF and a public relations officer of the former North-East provincial administration. **Kumar Ponnambalam** too ridiculed separatism when the TULF advocated it, supported the Indo-Lanka Accord and pledged to bring in the Tamil groups to implement it (Sunday Times 20.9.87) and asked **President Jayawardene** for a place for his party in the proposed Interim Council, all of which the LTTE leader wanted for his appointees (Sun 3.10.87). A year later he joined forces with the SLFP and campaigned on an anti-Accord platform. At least one candidate - **M.P.Sivagnanam** - on his party's list of candidates for the Jaffna District in the February 1989 general elections was shot dead by the LTTE (on 25.1.89).

Kumar Ponnambalam well understood the LTTE, which had given a clear message that he should keep out of politics in Jaffna. Five years later, prior to the August 1994 general elections, in an address to the Rotary Club in Trincomalee he took a frankly pro-LTTE separatist line and denounced the other Tamil parties as traitors. This was the prelude to his contesting parliamentary elections from Colombo in which he was unsuccessful. From this time, he was a vocal and insensitive advocate of the LTTE. His advocacy was blind to Tamil history and offensive to many Sinhalese and Tamils alike.

There was also the endearing side to him. He was affable and many a Tamil youth, who had gone through Sri Lanka's prisons as a PTA detainee, had his case taken up by **Kumar Ponnambalam** free of charge.

Pushing an ultra-Tamil nationalist line against his chequered background entailed a rhetorical approach that was not mellowed by reason. Ironically, the same private media that gave him publicity were also the same ones that promoted Sinhalese extremist opinions. A characteristic which explains the latter, was that they could not make out the difference between Neelan Thiruchelvam and **Kumar Ponnambalam**. The result was growing suffocation in the political atmosphere with reasoned discussion becoming increasingly difficult. With the LTTE's suicide bomb attacks thrown in, there was much potential for things to spin out of control.

To call the politics of those like **Kumar Ponnambalam** sincere or insincere is misleading. Sincerity applies where there is constancy and a commitment to human values. The politics of those like KP is rather, obsessive, blind to history and rooted in the present. In a sense it could be sincere in its blind obsessiveness and is not necessarily cowardly. KP went on despite being warned of dangers and being asked by his family and his friends to tone down. His friends in the media who encouraged both Sinhalese and Tamil extremism egged him on and finally were themselves in no position to control the fallout.

The posthumous denunciation of **Neelan Thiruchelvam** by members of the Tamil elite - including **Kumar Ponnambalam, Nadesan Sathyendra, Wakeley Paul** and some men in holy orders - signified an obsessive hatred that was closely akin to madness. The actors were themselves fast losing control of their emotions, words and actions. It was a state of mind heading towards breakdown, careless of dangers to themselves and those around them.

On the other hand, the popularity KP built up among a significant section of Tamils in the South was because he gave voice to the gut feelings of resentment harboured by many Tamils

against the State. This section does not represent all the Tamils who have grievances against the State, but is a segment of a very divided community. In the absence of freedom to discuss choices owing to internal terror, this community takes a very diversified approach to both the State and the LTTE, often based on immediate experience. If KP did not exist, the situation of the Tamils in the South would have demanded one like him to articulate their gut feelings.

We are indeed faced with a most perilous situation when a large section of the community is driven by this psychology. These are thoughts the people regularly encounter in the Tamil media and also in what is passed on by word of mouth. It justifies and whitewashes the systematic repression faced by people living under the LTTE. Among the Sinhalese, this psychology exposes the Tamils to silent resentment. In the Hill Country this ultra-nationalism is being fed to an alienated and discriminated population by politicians who hope to translate resentment into votes, as politics in the North-East did a generation ago. Expressions of hate such as 'traitor' and 'he deserves to be lamp-posted' have long found their way into common parlance in the Hill country.

The fallout from this situation can only be handled by sensitive understanding and timely reform. Is the country equipped for this? In particular the law enforcement machinery should be seen to be credible. The majority of the people who went to KP's funeral were of the opinion that he had been murdered by a state agency and they were quite a number who went. This feeling will persist unless the Government clears up the matter. Moreover, such feeling among the people is not unjustified. On 7th September 1999, journalist **Rohana Kumara** was killed. His journalism was of dubious quality and there are very influential persons who were once his friends and later became his enemies. He had of late been exposing allegedly corrupt activities of the President's Media Advisor. On 2nd November, **Nadarajah Ramesh**, a parliamentarian belonging to the EPDP and editor of a weekly that took a line similar to **Kumar Ponnambalam**'s was killed by a gunman wielding a T-56 or AK-47 rifle by broad day light in the well-policed Wellawatte area. The Police investigation of these two murders has been unconvincing. Despite **Ramesh** being a parliamentarian almost nothing had been said on the matter after an initial pledge to investigate. Under these conditions, the credibility of the State and the Police remains low among the people.

A particular problem that casts a shadow of suspicion over the State concerns the murder of **Nadarajah Ramesh** mentioned above. The location about Station Road, Wellawatte, is within a short distance from where KP was killed. Although an MP, he lived a secretive life. Though editing the **Thinamurasu**, a widely circulated paper promoting the LTTE, he hardly saw any one. From his abode in Kirullapone, he used to drive to his editorial office in Wellawatte. On the morning of 2nd November, he was gunned down as he came along the beach road and turned. The attackers apparently escaped on foot. This was within about a stone's throw from Wellawatte Police Station.

The incident also suggests that the killers had a base or safe-house in the area. If the Police had suspected LTTE involvement and a safe-house where they were storing automatic rifles, they would have lost no time in checking out the area house by house. No such checking was done until after the events of late December. There has been a singular lack of interest in the case. Thus people were quick to suspect state complicity. If the State was involved, going from **Ramesh** to **Ponnambalam** was only a matter of licence.

Moreover, unlike KP, **Ramesh** would not have been noticed by a Sinhalese extremist group. Of course he was well-known in Tamil political circles, was a thorn-in-the-flesh within his

own group - the EPDP - and was a temporary - and only temporary - asset to the LTTE. But, except for their politics and final location there are wide dissimilarities between the murders of KP and **Ramesh**.

Apart from these complications there is an awkward problem for the Government: If the Police have drawn a blank on **Ramesh**'s murder, and follow it up with a blank on KP's murder, it would become difficult for the Government to convince anyone that the State was not involved in the murder of KP.

If some agency of the State is orchestrating these killings, it is a very dangerous development. It destroys all points of reference between right and wrong and shows again that the State is unable to put behind its past reliance on terror. Certain steps have been taken in the right direction by making the security forces accountable in a few cases. Yet widespread torture in police custody of arrested LTTE suspects, unsolved disappearances among other abuses, are still continuing. Moreover, the first is common in Colombo. This is why it is urgent for **Kumar Ponnambalam**'s murder to be thoroughly investigated and the culprits, who ever they are, brought to book. His murder has created more space for someone else to carry forward his political creed in a far more harmful manner.

The State will have to prove its bona fides by getting to the bottom of this. It cannot be difficult as it was done in broad day light, by a killer who escaped and clues are bound to be forthcoming. But the present investigation by the Police gives cause for concern. Beyond circulating a drawing of the killer, questioning people and asking for information, little progress has been made.

While the IGP's determination to find the perpetrators is welcome, the Police have so far not gone further than saying that they have not found any evidence of a Sinhalese extremist group being involved. The Tamils never took this possibility seriously. To them the State is a key suspect and the Police seem to be going through a routine investigation without taking this possibility into account. It still has not occurred to them why people are reluctant to come forward with information. In comparison with the massive rewards being offered for information on the Town Hall bombing, the lackadaisical approach to the KP and **Ramesh** murders suggests that the Police have ruled out the LTTE.

The SSP, CDB, in charge of the case is the same man who, when in the CID, bungled the **Joel Pera** murder case of May 1997 where the Deputy Defence Minister's son was implicated. The CID is known to be politicised and is yet to come up with any successes in well known cases where the agents of crime are believed to be persons close to the State:- eg: the **Rohana Kumara** case.

We now move on to discuss how the events above tie up with developments in the North-East, the whole making up a powder keg. [\[Top\]](#)

Prelude to the Presidential Election

President Kumaratunge announced an early presidential election in October 1999, stating that she was asking for a mandate to pursue the stalled political package intended to resolve the ethnic question. The reason for the failure was said to be the UNP opposition's unwillingness to co-operate in the exercise. The election was one where the minority vote was thought to be crucial. The UNP candidate **Ranil Wickremasinghe** identified the problem as the

Government's unwillingness to talk to the LTTE and stated that he would start talks with the LTTE and in effect let the LTTE run the North-East provincial council for two years as part of an interim arrangement. He had no doubt been advised that this would get him Tamil votes. It was also a proposal to resurrect the disastrous arrangement which **Premadasa** made with the LTTE.

From the experience of the PA Government's talks with the LTTE in 1995, it was clear that the LTTE had no intention of discussing a political solution. But the arrangement with **Premadasa** had given the LTTE untrammelled power in the North-East without having to commit itself to a political arrangement within a united Sri Lanka. The LTTE did everything possible to help the election of **Ranil Wickremasinghe** whose position was predicated on the belief that the Tamils were behind the LTTE - a line generally put forward by NGO and peace lobbies. Given the LTTE's position on the election, among Tamils in particular, the election became less a contest between Kumaratunge and Wickremasinghe and became rather a referendum on whether the Tamils wanted the LTTE to run their lives or not. The LTTE took no chances. [\[Top\]](#)

Setback in the Vanni and the tragedy at Madhu

In early November the LTTE launched an attack on Oddusuddan Army camp in the Vanni and caused the Army to fall back nearly 13 miles to about 10 miles north of Vavuniya. The disarray in which the Army fell back in East Vanni encouraged the LTTE to repeat the same thing in West Vanni, partly in the hope of sealing the PA's defeat at the presidential election. The Army abandoned its position 8 miles north of Madhu and fell back south of the prestigious Roman Catholic shrine at Madhu, which also functioned as a UNHCR refugee camp. On 20th November the Army made a bid to take back some of the territory which it had abandoned and in a northward advance reached the Madhu shrine at 8.00 PM with the intention of continuing its advance. About 300 soldiers were in the shrine premises and at about 10.00 PM, five or so artillery shells fell in the shrine premises killing three dozens of refugees who had taken shelter in a chapel. It was the Army who had earlier sent the civilian refugees from the fighting in the surrounding areas, into the buildings. The Army arrived not long afterwards and took the injured to Vavuniya hospital. But the controversy remained as to who had fired the shells.

Several of the civilians thought that the Army had fired the shells because it had asked them to go into the buildings. The LTTE from its London office was quick to accuse the Army of having fired 'an artillery barrage'. But it also accused the Army of using the civilians as a shield, testifying that the shells were indeed artillery shells and the soldiers were close to the civilians. This has been generally accepted. In the statement issued by **Joseph Rayappu**, Bishop of Mannar, and **Malcolm Ranjith** of the Bishop's Conference, there was no suggestion that the Army had fired the shells. But they confirmed that the Army was in the premises, seeming to imply that this was the reason why the shells were fired.

A letter appeared in the Press that following the entry of the Army into the Madhu area about 8.00 PM, the Bishop of Mannar had received three telephone messages from the LTTE asking him to have the Army removed from the shrine premises. The report went on to say that the Bishop had tried to contact the political leaders in Colombo and had failed to get through. The shells were fired at about 10.00 PM, less than two hours after the Army's entry. It was also stated that the Bishop and church officials had no doubt that the LTTE had fired the shells. The report has not been contradicted by the Church. The Church has however not made any

clear statement on the matter and a senior church official when questioned on BBC Tamil Service on 21st November, stated that the people believed that the Army fired the shells but added that the LTTE could also have done it. When pressed further, he said that he was not an eyewitness to the firing of shells and closed the interview after saying that he would not like to give an opinion.

A conclusive investigation is yet to be done. It may also be noted that there is nothing new in the LTTE firing shells into civilian areas. Before the incident at Madhu, three civilians were killed when the LTTE fired shells into a northern suburb of Vavuniya town. In addition, in late November a shell fired by the LTTE fell near Mannar town. During December, civilians were killed as the result of the LTTE firing shells into the Jaffna peninsula. [\[Top\]](#)

The Attack on Thallady

Encouraged by its success in the area held by the Vavuniya command, on 22nd November the LTTE made a determined effort to push the Army out of the western sector under the command of the Mannar brigade. According to civilian sources, several LTTE leaders including Sea Tiger leader Soosai, had been in the area to oversee the attack. However, this time the army command at Mannar under **Brigadier Kulatunge** was steady in its reaction and the attack was foiled. Throughout the crisis, the Brigadier kept in touch with the civil authorities and told the people not to panic. A special arrangement was made to allow bus passengers from Colombo to come to Mannar on the first day, rather than turn them back as normally happens. Although there was initial panic about food shortages, within two or three days food supplies were brought to the MPCs from Madawachchiya. In the Thallady defences, the Army withdrew from only one outlying position to Chethukulam, which is also part of the Thallady defences, and held on despite heavy pressure. **Major I.P.K.K.Baduge** who led the defence died in action on 23rd November. The LTTE withdrew after losing 8 senior leaders and injuries being sustained by the Vanni leader **Lakshman**.

It was evident to the civilians that while troops under the Vavuniya command were notably demoralised, those under the Mannar command were steady. A large number of soldiers under the Vavuniya command in the Mannar sector, in the course of their withdrawal southwards, arrived at Adamban. They were so dejected it appeared to the villagers that they could hardly lift their guns. Later they arrived at the army controlled line at Uyilankulam, which was manned by the STF. The STF scolded them and asked them to go back, stay in Adamban and fight. They dejectedly went back to Adamban, stayed there for two days and came back to Uyilankulam. It would seem that there was considerable confusion among officers and men in the Vavuniya command about their task. However, a week later, those in the Vavuniya command seemed to have recovered. Civilians travelling along the Mannar-Vavuniya road found the soldiers behaving normally and ambush parties were also going out to check LTTE movement. [\[Top\]](#)

The LTTE Takes on Jaffna

Fighting with less than 10,000 cadre, against an army more than ten times its size, with many of them very young, and women making up about a third of the casualties, the LTTE did not have the capacity to hold territory against a determined army advance. It could not repeat its successes in pushing back the Army once the Army had regained some sort of equilibrium. But in attacking Elephant Pass at the entrance to Jaffna, the LTTE seemed to feel a

compulsion to go on irrespective of the casualties. One could identify two distinct sources of pressure on the LTTE. In its overseas propaganda which is oriented towards fund raising and keeping the faithful happy, expectations had been raised of Eelam coming into being very soon, even with the dawning of the year 2000. The other factor was that the drift of voting tendency in Jaffna was very much towards the PA. Such an outcome was bound to challenge the LTTE's claim to exclusive rights over the Tamils, so they somehow had to apply pressure on the Jaffna voters. Also since the UNP candidate had taken up the position that in the event of his being elected the LTTE could run the North-East for two years, if the LTTE had made military inroads into Jaffna, they could claim to have pushed the Army out as the Army withdrew in the event of a UNP victory.

Civilians in Jaffna too noticed that army morale was not high and many of the men were hoping for a UNP victory so that they could go home. From the 11th of December the LTTE started shelling Thenmaratchy and the coastal areas of Jaffna town and asked the civilians to move out of these areas. This calculated displacement was the same thing that they had done in Vavuniya and Mannar districts during the previous months. The effect of this was calculated to induce a sense of resignation among the citizenry and the voters.

But, Elephant Pass held out even though the Army had to withdraw from certain positions. The LTTE attacked repeatedly, although the element of surprise had been lost. The LTTE casualties from this attack are believed to number more than 500. According to the Government, the Army lost about 150 men. Artillery was used by both sides. Those with FM radio sets listening to the LTTE's communications, heard a group of cadre in the front telling their commanders that advance was difficult. But they were urged to go on. The LTTE was prepared to pay a high price. Even after the elections were held, the LTTE felt the compulsion to go on attacking Elephant Pass.

Another reason for this was the grand observance for the dawning of the year 2000 in the Vanni. A 47-foot cut-out of the LTTE leader had been erected at Mallavi. Beside it were two huge maps. One showed in colour the part of Sri Lanka that was Tamil Eelam. Another map of Vanni showed the LTTE's territorial gains in recent weeks. It was a three-day celebration to convince the people that Eelam was coming soon and to draw in new recruits

On 18th December 1999, on the last day of the election campaign, an LTTE suicide bomber narrowly missed killing **President Chandrika Kumaratunge** and another bomber killed the UNP's prospective defence minister, General Algama. The election was held as scheduled on the 21st December. The Presidential election was won by **Chandrika Kumaratunge**.

There was a sequel to the shelling of Madhu, where the LTTE killed the wrong man who had no political involvement. **Anton Mariadas** of Vavuniya was a free-lance journalist who was frequently used by the Roman Catholic Church to produce their programmes. Vanampadi is a radio station of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) broadcasting from Vavuniya for residents in the North. Its news content generally questioned the dominant LTTE politics and is also a propaganda channel of the State. But it also played a role in enhancing access to religious and cultural programmes in the North. The Roman Catholic Church took this facility to broadcast its programmes. A particular programme planned was to broadcast the New Year mid-night service from the church in Vavuniya. One producer was a journalist from SLBC, based in Colombo, who was to work with **Anton Mariadas** in Vavuniya to broadcast the mid-night service. The journalist from Colombo had earlier been critical of the Catholic Church in the North. He had commented on a programme that the church leaders were quick

to condemn the shelling of Madhu, pretending that it was done by the Army, but had been very silent over the shelling of predominantly Roman Catholic areas in Jaffna town. It so happened that on New Year's eve both **Mariadas** and the journalist from Colombo went to church separately wearing shirt and tie, but **Mariadas** got there first. When he came out the of church on some business, certain intruders marched him 100 yards away from the church and shot him dead. Later, a small boy came and shouted from a church window that the person who came from Colombo had been killed and ran away. Here is an example of how ordinary people suffer, when church leaders who ought to be playing a leading role, maintain a methodical silence. [\[Top\]](#)

Shelling by the LTTE

The shelling of coastal areas of Jaffna has continued from mid-December. Many of the people affected are fisherfolk who are Christians. More than 3 and up to 15 civilians have been killed and others live in terror. The actual casualties have not been publicised because it is the LTTE. Some shells have fallen in interior areas such as Chavakacheri and Nallur. The Tamil media who never miss a chance to wax indignant against the Army have merely reported shells falling from the air without any indication of who fired them. IBC, an overseas Tamil radio based in London has described the shelling by the LTTE as liberating the people from the Army. But in reality civilians vacate one Army controlled area because of the shelling and move into another Army controlled area!

Christmas too was celebrated under these conditions and the Church has been largely silent. In early 1995 both the Roman Catholic Bishops of Jaffna and Mannar backed the LTTE's position that the Government should satisfy 'the day-to-day needs of the people', before talking about a political solution. The present outrage of shelling is of course to satisfy the day-to-day needs of fascist politics. [\[Top\]](#)

Vanni - The Tortured People

Those who went to the Vanni from Jaffna during the 1995 exodus have largely left. The Vanni which comprises four electorates has now only a fraction of its population living under LTTE control. The number now living under LTTE control though often quoted as 400,000 is probably no more than 200,000. This would be more realistic considering that the actual population of Jaffna today is about 40% lower than the 1981 population. The rest from the Vanni are scattered over Colombo, South India and the rest of the world. Along with this, if one allows 100,000 for the interior areas of the Batticaloa District, the LTTE's recruiting base is from a civilian population of about 300,000. This population is called upon to sustain an LTTE fighting force of 7000 to 10,000. By comparison, the 100,000 strong Sri Lankan Army is sustained by a population of more than 12 million. The population sustaining the LTTE's fighting capacity is either trapped in the Vanni or is living in very deprived social surroundings in the East with no escape. In the Vanni every aspect of their life is managed by the LTTE. Illness and poverty are compounded by land-mine injuries resulting from minefields left behind with shifting defence lines. According to authoritative sources 1500 persons have been fitted with artificial limbs and there is a long waiting list. This would mean that in every village of 200 families there are about 10 persons who have lost one or both legs. The whole thrust of the LTTE's dealings with the people is to do with recruitment.

In recent times, much of the recruitment has been made part of the system. According to figures given by the LTTE 10,000 of its cadre have been killed in the last five years. This means that the LTTE needs 2000 recruits a year to maintain its numbers. This is probably higher in recent times in view of the spate of conventional attacks. It means that it must recruit a number amounting to 30% or more of those coming of age annually in schools. Normally this kind of recruitment will fast destroy the community, and would lead to a high degree of resistance. We give below a testimony which gives us some idea of how the pressure is applied.

These basic statistics give, if anything, a picture of the frighteningly tyrannical conditions under which these people live. It is from such a society that the LTTE is able to find people who willingly blow themselves up as suicide bombers.

In recent months, recruitment has been more or less regularised. In schools, the older children undergo compulsory physical training three days a week. They are later made to march with poles and from here onwards they move to carrying guns. Families on low income are entitled receive government rations. The Tigers allow them to collect these rations only if one member of the family performs some service for the Tigers, such as digging bunkers. From here onwards recruitment becomes a process of filtration. The conditions can be tightened or loosened depending on opposition and the needs of the Tigers.

A good deal of what happens over recruitment is ad hoc. Recently the LTTE was applying much pressure on children in a particular area of Mullaitivu District to join them. A father from the area who is a farmer applied for a pass to take his son to Vavuniya. The boy was about 15 years of age. The LTTE told him if his son is to leave rather than join them, he must pay Rs.50,000 for the pass and serve in the border force. The father paid the money, took his family to Vavuniya and is now an LTTE auxiliary doing sentry duty. [\[Top\]](#)

Recruitment in the Vanni - an Experience

The experience given below tells us a good deal about the strategies and even a measure of pseudo-legality governing the recruitment of school children in the Vanni. The experience shows that everyone involved - both the recruiters and the recruited - are trapped into the war machine in different ways. It has become a part of life that has been progressively systematised.

We will call her name **Kala**. She was 16 years old and studying in a village school in the Mullaitivu District. She was the third in a family of six. Recruitment had further intensified from the time the government forces started their northward advance in mid-1997. Those studying in school were accosted everywhere, while going and coming from school or tuition classes and were told that all boys and girls must join the movement. It was then that they would get Tamil Eelam soon, they were told. Then they were asked, "Are you going to leave this fight to the next generation?" The children were asked further, "What sacrifices have you made for Tamil Eelam?" They remained silent and tried to avoid the recruiters.

One day the recruiters came to school and told the Principal that they must stop everything as they are going to conduct a propaganda class. The teachers told the children, "The Tigers are telling us that we have done nothing for the cause of Tamil Eelam and there is some point in what they say". They then advised the children, "You listen to their propaganda, but don't

join them”. The Principal and teachers quietly stopped the classes for the younger children and sent messages to the parents to carefully take their children away.

Following the LTTE’s capture of Kilinochchi the recruiters came to school and insisted that the children should join to replace the 400 cadre they had lost in the operation. There were altogether three divisions in the O/Level class with a total of 100 students. Out of this there were 20 students, including **Kala**, in whose families none was either a martyr or a member of the LTTE. (A martyr is one who had died fighting for the LTTE.)

A recruiter asked this group, “What are you doing for our cause? Of course, you are giving us some help but you don’t know it. The Government is sending you food relief. We too eat from that without your knowing it. Apart from this are you giving us any help with your bodies or in any other form?” The militant families were addressed separately. They were asked, “What if your brothers and sisters have fought or died for our cause? Are you trying to enjoy life on the basis of their sacrifice? Everyone must have a feeling for our nation. Any number of people from a family can join our movement.”

Those from **Kala’s** group were called one by one, asked for details about their home and were told that in this pressing situation they must join and fight. They were asked, “Don’t you have a conscience or feelings?” Usually three or four people came for propaganda classes. They were in the age group of 25-30. They were chosen for eloquence or had reached a point where they were injured or for some reason exempted from fighting. **Kala’s** group remained silent. Those from militant families were first allowed to go home. **Kala** and her group were allowed to go home later. They were walking as a group, when LTTE members with a vehicle came and stopped them. The girls were told, “We have lost 400 of our comrades in the battle for Kilinochchi and we are somehow going to replace them. If not, the Sri Lankan Army would retake Kilinochchi and their sacrifice will be wasted. Come and join us, not because of the 15,000 who had been martyred earlier, but because of the 400 who died at Kilinochchi.”

The girls were then pressed to get into the vehicle. Several of the girls broke the cordon and ran away. Eleven of the girls stood silently without attempting to run. **Kala** was pressed into the van. She later recalled, “When I was in the van, the other girls cried in agony asking me to break out and escape. My heart burst in pain at seeing their anxiety on my behalf. The poor girls did not know that they too would be forced into the van.” All the eleven girls were forced into the van and driven to a base in an unknown place. There their names, addresses and other details were recorded. There were about 1000 girls there, who had either come there earlier or had been brought like **Kala’s** group.

They were told that the details are being sent to the higher authorities and that they would be sent for training only after the approval comes. **Kala** was there for two days. All the eleven who were brought in **Kala’s** lot somehow wanted to go home. **Kala** and eight others were placed in one group and **Kala** was made the deputy leader of the group. The two remaining girls were placed among another group. **Kala** was told that if the leader gets authorisation to go for training, then she would become leader. On the second day, four from the group dropped out and only seven wanted to go home. **Kala** approached some girls on sentry duty who were from her school and told them of their wish to go home. The girls on sentry duty told her that they would let them go and take the punishment saying that they were asleep when the others escaped. The seven girls left the camp at 7.00 PM. At one point they heard an alarm and thought that there was a search out for them. Getting advice from a cadre whom they met on the way, they walked through the jungle and finally came to some buildings.

They thought it was the camp from which they escaped and made up their minds to surrender. But upon a closer look they found that those were houses of a village. They knocked on the first door but no one responded. They then knocked on the door of the second house. The inmates woke up and welcomed them in and served them hot tea. The girls were told it was a good thing that they did not wake up the person in the first house, as he would have sent word to the LTTE. The girls were in no state to move out since **Kala** was in her school uniform and the other girls had surrendered their ear studs at the camp. They would have given themselves away as escapees. The girls received directions from the people of the house, resumed their journey in the night, and eventually contacted their homes.

The propaganda wing man in **Kala's** area was known to be a hard man and threatened to somehow catch **Kala** again. Her parents sent her to a neighbouring village. She came back home and sat for her O/Levels after the propaganda wing man was transferred out. The students in the O/Level class had been avoiding the recruiters saying that they are studying hard for the O/Level and it would be a waste to join now without sitting for the O/Levels. On the day the O/Level exam was over the school was surrounded by the LTTE propaganda wing. They importuned the students to join. They were told, "One day you will have to die. If you die fighting, it will be a hero's death, but if you die a natural death, it will be a coward's death. Your parents may today discourage you from joining. But later they would be ashamed of you."

Another man from the propaganda wing told them, "When I joined the movement, several of my friends refused to join. One day after the Army came to Kilinochchi they went to pluck coconuts from their garden. A shell burst near them and all of them died. But I'm still alive. If I had not joined I would have died with them."

In the course of the propaganda session, they were told that their studies would not suffer if they joined the movement. Even those who sold gram (kadalai) and joined the movement are now receiving education inside the movement. They were told that their leader is extremely concerned about their education. **Featuring very much in the propaganda sessions were reported human rights violations by the Army in Jaffna. They were told how the women of Jaffna are being raped and many disappeared after the Army take-over.**

Kala kept getting mixed signals. Once she was told by someone that she need not have escaped from the camp, because the Leader had withheld approval for her to undergo training. The Leader, it is said, had given instructions that only those above 18 should be sent for training and the others should be sent home. There was another rumour that all those who left camp without permission will be captured and sent back. **Kala's** parents decided to get her out of the Vanni.

Coming from her testimony are several elements of pseudo-legality observed by the group. The recruiters maintain that the leader had ordered them to ask people only three times and that if they did not join, they would later realise their mistake and join. But the recruiters also insist, that they would ask them any number of times and it is their decision and not the Leader's. It is also notable that enormous pressure is applied on the youth but conscription in this instance was short of being wholly physical. Those who ran home were allowed to go and only those who did not run were forced into the van. On another occasion in the same school, the recruiters stopped the school session and started their propaganda class. Four boys volunteered to join and asked to be taken to camp. On the way these boys asked the LTTE

men to stop their motor bikes and told the recruiters that they had pretended to volunteer only because they had disrupted the school session and got down and went home.

When the girls were taken to the camp too they were assessed and treated differently. Some girls said that they feel for their families, but they will have forget all about it and be militants. But several girls started thinking about their families and were crying inconsolably. These girls were separated and kept away from the others. The claim made to the girls that their training must await permission from their Leader was a means of keeping options open. It appears that the LTTE was not very serious about capturing the girls who escaped. And in the event of their escape the LTTE was able to maintain that the Leader had rejected them.

Kala herself to some extent believes that the Leader upholds certain rules for recruitment. She cited an example of a fifteen-year-old who had left a letter for his parents, run away and joined the LTTE. He, it is said, was sent back because he was under age. But there had been cases of young cadre in the thirteen to fifteen age group who had surrendered to the Army - e.g. at Mankulam in October 1998. In the latter instance, the thirteen-year-old was used to carry food to those who were fighting. The LTTE has developed greater sophistication in its recruitment and the people in the closed environment in the Vanni are very vulnerable. Some elements in the LTTE's propaganda are very powerful and capture a reality which many of the people find readily plausible. Here is an example:

“The Sri Lankan Army and Government are carrying on a determined campaign to wipe out the Tamil race. In their sight, Tamils are Tigers and Tigers are Tamils. They do not make a distinction between the two. You are going in your school uniforms, a Kfir bomber is coming on a mission. If you think that the Air Force will not bomb you because you are students, then you are mistaken. The bombs and shells make no distinction between civilians and militants. They only know that whoever the victims, they will be Tamils. You will of course recall the massacre by bombing at **Suthanthirapuram** in the Vanni and the students killed at Nagar Kovil in Point Pedro. You have a choice. You can die in vain and after the 31st day observance, you will be forgotten. But you can instead join us and attain martyrdom. Your sacrifice and courage will then be remembered in the annals of the nation.”

The case of another woman in the propaganda wing gives an idea of how the people are trapped in a hopeless environment. Even if they want to leave, there was nowhere to go. She said, “I and my younger sister joined the movement. I am now not in a state to fight. The Leader of the Nation gave me a letter asking me to go home. But I have no mind to go home. I long to see the birth of Tamil Eelam while I am still a militant. After all, the militants who become Black Tigers turn themselves into torches and die the death of the brave. Following their example their brother or sister would come and join us to fight for the cause. Why do they do this? Is it not to win Tamil Eelam so that our generation can live in happiness and freedom? When they perform such sacrifices, can any sacrifice by you be too much?”

We may also note that in the particular school considered, about 80% of the children had someone in the LTTE. This percentage will progressively become higher. It is still remarkable that young LTTE cadre are willing to assist friends who want to escape from the organisation and also that people are willing to shelter runaways from the organisation. It shows that despite the LTTE having made deep inroads into the society, qualities of human decency still remain unimpaired and it should be the task of peace groups to give these qualities a fuller reign. It would be wrong and counter to their interests to go about making the superficial claim that the people are with the LTTE. The position taken by the teachers explains the

dilemma in which the Government has placed them. They had doubts about the LTTE and quietly sent the younger children home. They told the others, “They have a point. Listen to them, but don’t join”. [\[Top\]](#)

Suicide Bombers

The last month witnessed three suicide bomb attacks in Colombo, which rocked the city. All three were believed to have come from the Eastern Province. The young woman who made an attempt on the President’s life was first thought to have come from Thalankudah, which is about 5 miles south of Batticaloa. The man who killed **General Algama** is said to have come from Trincomalee. The woman who blew herself up opposite the Prime minister’s office on 5th January had an identity card from Kolavil. What these areas have experienced from the state forces since 1985 tells a harrowing tale and little has been done to qualitatively change the situation. It is still the case that if a civilian is killed, the body is taken to the mortuary, the Police record the version of the security forces and generally that is the end of the matter. This is one of the areas which we mentioned where little has been done by activist groups in the South to improve the conditions of the people.

Now the girl initially thought to have come from Kolavil was stopped for questioning by the Police and was seen crying for some time before she blew herself up. Why did she cry? Those tears have a good deal to tell not only about the State but also about the Tamil people who support the LTTE.

Kolavil is a suburb of Akkaraipattu in the Amparai District. Both poverty and state oppression are keenly felt. In 1990 June the security forces entered Akkaraipattu under a Colonel who is now Major General. His actions in Kalmunai had resulted in hundreds of disappearances. Shortly after he entered Akkaraipattu, about 50 persons went missing. For months the families did not know what had happened to them. They lived in hope believing a rumour that those detained were held at Kondavettuvan army camp. But to this day they are missing. The STF then took over. The routine of torture, beating and disappearance continued. The following are experiences from Akkaraipattu (Our [Report No.11](#)):

Sellapah Rasaputhiran (20) of Akkaraipattu 7 was the eldest of eight brothers. Since his father had died, he left school after grade five and worked as an assistant to a mason to support the family. He was arrested by the STF on the 24th November 1990 during a cordon and search operation with help from Muslim home guards. He was tortured for two months in Akkaraipattu, pricked in his genitals and fingers, administered phalanga and iron nails were driven into his hand nails and the nails were pulled out. His wrist was broken. He was hung upside-down and beaten with an iron rod and a piece of timber. Several of his companions disappeared. He was released in November 1992 and is disabled.

Rasalatchumi of Kolavil (Akkaraipattu 3) had a number of children of whom one had joined the LTTE. She did not know whether he was alive or dead. Sometime later the STF heard about it, paid frequent visits to her house and harassed her and her children. One day in 1992 they dismantled her well-sweep and took it away, preventing her from drawing water. She was forced to leave the area.

Cases of this kind have continued ever since. Life is unpredictable. There had been several cases of people going to the paddy fields being shot by the STF and then unbelievable reasons given. There have been incidents even under the PA government, which show that the people

are still denied normal justice. There was the well-known incident on 15th September 1996 when **Ministers Ashraff & Fowzie** were visiting Kalmunai. Two students **Rameshkumar** and **Sivanandarajah** were stopped on the road by the STF, whose detention was witnessed. Later, the bodies turned up in the Kalmunai hospital mortuary. The Magistrate found the version given by the STF contradictory and false. But the STF sub-inspector Ariyawansa received a reward and a promotion on the grounds that they had killed two LTTE cadre who came on bicycles and refused to stop, and so saved the ministers from being killed by the LTTE. Then that was how the State turned several youths into suicide bombers.

But then, what about the well-to-do Tamils who support the LTTE? In 1995 when peace was within reach, instead of pressing the LTTE to come to a political settlement, they praised the LTTE for resuming the war in their fight for Tamil Eelam. Instead of giving this girl's people peace and a chance to rebuild their life, they used their money to present her with a suicide kit. When she exploded herself, they and their children applauded. This is the state of Tamil nationalism today. The suicide bomber had the identity card of **Yasoda Thilakaratnam** from Kolavil. After questioning the parents, the Police have now found that **Yasoda Thilakaratnam**, who had a Sinhalese mother, had joined the LTTE two years ago, but was not the suicide bomber in question.[\[Top\]](#)

Nationalism and Political Opportunism

Tamil nationalism today, which is articulated by the Tigers and the Tigers alone, has reached its nadir. Anyone else in the nationalist game is there only as a satellite of the LTTE. It has immense attractions for members of the Tamil diaspora who enjoy marginal status in foreign lands. But for the Tamils who have to live in the North-East, it has very limited attractions. To those in the Vanni celebrating the millennium wondering at a 47 foot cut-out of **Prabhakaran** along with two huge maps displaying what he has achieved and what he hopes to achieve, his boasts only portend progressive destruction. Unlike to their expatriate compatriots savouring the fruits of modernity, to those in the Vanni the monuments at Mallavi only signal misery, landmines and mental trauma.

Tamil nationalism as practised today by its advocates and the Press has two parts to it. One is to rattle off a frightening catalogue of disappearances, rapes, murders and massacres by the Sri Lankan Forces and paint a picture where everything is black without a glimmer of hope. Any question as to whether the Tamil nationalist leadership has acted responsibly to protect the life and the interests of the Tamils is readily answered by citing a few recent cases of rape and disappearance and posing the rhetorical question, what could anyone have done with such incorrigible brutes as the Sinhalese? Except in small Left circles, highly educated Tamils in the mainstream had ceased to reflect on where this would carry the Tamils. In politics of this kind, upholding the essential brutishness of the Sinhalese assumes top priority. When the **Krishanthi Kumaraswamy** rape and murder trial had come to court, **Kumar Ponnambalam** kept saying it was eyewash and that the accused would get away scot-free. When the accused were given maximum sentences, those present in court saw in KP a most disappointed man.

The other part of the creed is that since no good can come out of the Sinhalese, the LTTE is the only hope. It is argued with considerable violence to history that without the LTTE no government in Colombo would have talked about devolution or a political solution. The argument is simply that because the Sinhalese are so vile and brutish, only the draconian sacrifices demanded by the LTTE can bring the Tamils any relief.

It could be upheld with some validity that the armed struggle had an impact on the Sri Lankan Government and the Sinhalese polity, pushing them to re-evaluate certain premises. At the same time it may be argued that it was mainly Indian involvement and assistance that brought pressure on the Government to agree to the solution contained in the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. If India did not come in the fate of the Tamils after the Vadamaratchi offensive looked very uncertain. While these arguments have some merit, the important thing is to understand the internal dynamism and other factors such as re-evaluation in the South after '83, apart from economical, social and other factors which also need to be accounted for. But if we analyse the LTTE factor, its role has always tended to destroy all benign development and to drive the Tamils further away from peace with dignity. Thus, superficial claims which ignore history and try to explain the present by isolating a few factors, and ignoring others whose effect is hidden by being constant and prolonged, do violence to reality.

Thus, to sustain the LTTE's dominance, any Tamil who engages with the Government to bring relief to the Tamil people is destroyed as a traitor. No such person should be allowed to succeed if this politics is to survive. Thus, one Tamil daily had an editorial lamenting the murder of **Neelan Thiruchelvam**. The next day the same paper carried a cartoon showing a Tamil man's neck being cut by an instrument described as 'moderation'. So, the moderate Tamil politician **Neelan Thiruchelvam** had to be killed and his reputation sullied as a man destroying, rather saving the Tamils. Being rattled by the condolence messages pouring in from leading persons world-wide, the LTTE lobby lost their senses and indulged in a clumsy orgy of character assassination.

It is here that the hypocrisy of this group becomes evident. The violence suffered by the Tamils in the course of a war that was forced on them is a reality. But the LTTE supporting nationalists would not allow the Tamil people at home to look at options apart from giving their lives to the LTTE's cause. They deny to the tortured people in the Vanni and the Tamil people in general the enormous relief available to them from international law, world opinion and international institutions. Instead, they try to pervert all international concern to strengthen the LTTE at great cost to the people. But for themselves and theirs they keep all the options open. They use every means to send their children abroad and often have excellent contacts with the ruling establishment in Colombo and with international organisations which protect even those who voice the LTTE's dogmas.

Here is an irony, one could use the protection of international institutions to go on telling young Tamils through newspaper columns that there is absolutely no protection against the wickedness of the Sri Lankan State. The indirect message being given to these young persons is that they have no hope except to put on a suicide kit and die, while those who spread this message to others' children have plenty of hope that the Sri Lankan government will be prevented from doing them any harm by organised international concern. They zealously keep this protection just for themselves, and will not allow it to extend to the ordinary Tamil people. [\[Top\]](#)

Political Murders & Tamil Dilemmas

The LTTE's success in stifling protest within the Tamil community has gone hand in hand with transforming popular attitudes to murder. The dominant politics and in turn the Press have together played a leading role in effecting this transformation which has prepared the ground for this auto-genocidal culture. In 1975, the feeling of outrage against **Alfred Duraiyappah's** murder may not have been that widespread, particularly among the younger

generation, as he had been subject to prolonged political character assassination in the nationalist media. And yet, there was still the freedom to express outrage. A large number of people had attended his funeral since fear had not gripped the community. Today a political murder is greeted - the lead coming from the Press - with approval or censure depending only on who committed the murder and what the person's role was. A person killed by the LTTE must necessarily be a traitor and so asked for it, and a person helping the LTTE or speaking for its cause who was killed must be a hero or patriot. This has given rise to pressing dilemmas that have not been addressed.

Nadesan Satyendra was secretary to the labour ministry in the **Jayewardene** Government and was closely associated with **Gamini Dissanayake's** ambitions, but is today a leading LTTE spokesman.

Kumar Ponnambalam was in alliance with the SLFP and MEP in the 1988 presidential election and was a vocal critic of the LTTE before his conversion in 1994.

From 1990-94, **Nadarajah Ramesh** was a sworn enemy of the LTTE. Even in Colombo, his party, the EPDP, was in league with the security forces and **Ramesh** himself was involved in killings of suspected LTTE sympathisers. **Prabhakaran** would never have forgiven him for the popular radio satire in which the Leader was effectively lampooned. His conversion too came in 1994 as a survival gambit.

Had these persons been killed in an earlier phase of their life they would have been contemptible traitors. But they lived to have the chance of 'conversion' and exercise their right to freedom of speech in favour of the LTTE. They lived to become public figures, heroes and patriots and two of them in death became martyrs or 'Supremely Great Men'.

Some have had the misfortune of having their status subsequently made unclear. **Kandiah Perinpanathan** and **Kandiah Gajendran** were top ranking LTTE operatives in the West under **Lawrence Thilagar**. On 26th October 1996, they were gunned down in Boulevard la Chapelle in Paris. In a statement issued from London on 9th November 1996, the Leader commended the deceased as persons to whom 'the Tamil liberation movement owes a gratitude' and blamed their murder on the 'enemy'.

In early 1997, **Thilagar** who justified the LTTE's murders and evoked dread among overseas Tamils was suddenly re-called to the Vanni. The man and his reputation collapsed into the obscurity of the Mullaitivu jungles. Rumours started surfacing that the Paris murders were an internal job and that **Thilagar** who had become too big for the Leader's liking had been cut down to size as others who had made the mistake before him. Today no one is sure whether **Perinpanathan** and **Gajendran** are martyrs or traitors. It has now fallen to Sri Lankan police investigators to determine the status of **Ponnambalam** and **Ramesh**.

Today's Tamil political culture is one which suffers from a state of anarchy in which there is no objective standard to determine a person's contribution. It belittles the whole community. The Tamils who back the LTTE have an obligation to ask the Leader a couple of questions: If **Ponnambalam** could one day be a traitor and given time to see the truth, become a 'Supremely Great Man', why was not this opportunity given to the thousands killed in LTTE torture camps? Why was not this opportunity given to **Neelan Thiruchelvam**?

A young man being ordered to sacrifice his life and in the process destroy that of another who, like **Neelan Thiruchelvam** for example, is not by any means a military threat to the LTTE, raises many serious and pertinent questions not only about the Leader who ordered it, but also about the status of our community which glorifies and justifies that Leader. Why are we unable to raise issues and evaluate the level of insanity to which our community has degraded itself? Even Tamil papers published by the so called national NGOs which are funded by international organisations to promote democracy and human values, failed miserably in this endeavour. Their gamely approach to the dominant political trend among the Tamils exemplifies a frightening level of degeneration in the whole relationship. These organisations have been unable to build a coherent and meaningful approach to the real crisis.

In supporting the LTTE's political line, both **Ponnambalam** and **Ramesh** justified killings of individuals by the LTTE and belittled the dead. **Ramesh** character assassinated **A.Thangathurai** and **Neelan Thiruchelvam** after they were murdered by the LTTE. Both vanished into the cesspool of their own undertakings. A poignant observation was made on the tragedy of **Ramesh**: "His readers lost the ability to think. They ceased to have opinions about the events around them. Today the Tamil people have no opinion about the murder of **Ramesh**." How can we come out of this fate? Time is long past where these killings had ceased to be isolated incidents that could be analysed individually. **A healthy turn in the future of the Tamils requires that they rediscover values to see murder - any murder - as abhorrent in itself. It is vital that we create a movement to give muscle and expression to the dormant public outrage against the political trend which manipulates minds so as to cheapen life. Only this can restore sanity to the community. Although it involves taking risks, it is this that should be the priority of religious and political leaders, social activists and leaders of civil society in the Tamil Community.**[\[Top\]](#)

The State and the Tamil People

A persisting element of the State that has not been decisively challenged is again brought out by the rape and murder of the young mother **Sarathammal** in Pungudutivu on 28th December 1999. The offenders were four naval personnel from the detachment at Pungudutivu. When the brother **Rajasekaran**, who was tied up during the incident, made inquiries at the navy camp the next day, he was told that all the men were inside and it could not be the Navy. The body was found later and when the matter received publicity, the President ordered an inquiry. It is here that the problem arises. If the President does not intervene, the system will cover up. A recent report in the Press stated that according to the CID witnesses are not coming forward. This is understandable among people who have to live with the Navy in a fairly lonely place, unless they are sure that the State would protect them. No doubt, the murder of **Kumar Ponnambalam** would have increased their anxiety.

We see this same pattern in many of the major cases of violations. When an air force pilot bombed refugees at St.Peter and St.Paul's, Naval, in 1995, the President promised an inquiry and then the matter was covered up. When schoolchildren at Nagar Kovil were bombed, the incident was denied by the Defence Ministry, and covered up. In the **Krishanthy Kumarasamy** case, the brigadier or his superior generals in Jaffna could have identified and apprehended the culprits in no time. But the defence authorities kept up their denial until the matter threatened to go out of control and the President ordered an inquiry.

All these have one disturbing feature. If it is a question of rape, murder or pilot error in targeting a bomb by an individual, or a small group of individuals, it is no more than a

crime or culpable homicide if the system immediately makes them answerable. But when the system's natural impulse is to cover up, it becomes much more than a crime of an individual or individuals. It becomes the mark of an oppressive system - of the State. That is very dangerous.

In this situation, when members of the LTTE propaganda wing, the Tamil newspapers or Tamil nationalist politicians tell Tamil youth that the Tamil people are up against the system that is bent on raping Tamil women and destroying the Tamil people, it contains more than a germ of truth. It is a major failure of the PA Government that we still have not got this aspect of the State behind us.

The Challenge before the Government and the People

Following the murder of **Kumar Ponnambalam** there is such a disturbing air of fear among the Tamils in Colombo that we have not had for five years. Those talking about the murder are not being told by others that there is a killer agency of the state targeting individuals. They are too scared to suggest anything of that kind. Rather, they are saying, "You have a wife and children, you must think about them". The suggestion, even if untrue, is not a ridiculous one. During UNP rule, the State built up agencies which freely indulged in extra-judicial killings. Famous among those which operated in the North-East were the ones headed by **Munas** and **Suresh Cassim**. **Munas** had been sighted in an STF camp in the Eye Hospital area in 1995 during the time of the PA government, after 20 bodies turned up in lakes around Colombo. These units are intact and have only been biding their time, hoping perhaps for a UNP government where it would be business as usual. Columnists and activists concerned with human rights fear that some of these units may have jumped at the President's remarks about not tolerating any leanings towards terrorism, to take matters into their own hands.

During UNP rule in the 1980s, the State's links with the underworld became a fact of life. To some extent, this has been continued under the PA. One consequence of this is that, had not the head of the suicide bomber been found, the murder of **General Algama** would have been readily attributed to the PA government. Such are things this country can today ill afford. The public morality of the Government must be above board.

Another potential element of volatility is the Army. **President Jayewardene** politicised it. Politicians with indefensible and oppressive goals felt more secure when they could break the system and place personal appointees in top positions of the Security Services. For a time, it gave the President an illusion of unchallenged power. It was only an illusion because the President could not know what was going on below. By 1987 the system was in deep crisis and was cracking up. Although the political establishment was reluctant to reach any accommodation with the Tamils, the Army was tired. A group of influential army officers was preparing to ask the President to offer the Tamils federalism. Even after the resumption of war in 1990, it was clear that good sections of the security forces were wary of political extremism in the South. The extremists could make the political waters murky by holding out against reasonable accommodation with the Tamils, but could not for all their eloquence send a dozen of recruits to the war front. Instead, they frightened the Tamils and made the war more bitter and costly.

By making little headway in bringing devolution and accountable government closer to the Tamils, the present Government has for the last five years been banking heavily on the security forces, allowing their side of the job to go by default. The Army has been pushed to

perform according to political timetables, while the politicians did little to make their job easier. Thus, the same mistaken strategies followed by earlier UNP governments have been perpetuated.

Defence is by far the heaviest item of expenditure in the budget and is all on account of the Tamil problem. How many ministers in the Cabinet sit down and think about how to solve this problem? One gets the impression that this whole area of activity has been left to the Deputy Defence Minister. And as the recent election campaign and the active backing of security forces in the North-East for the UNP indicated, the Army was ready to pack up and go home. All this indicates a poor quality of governance.

Thus the Government's failure to bring immediate relief to the victims of violations by the security forces and the ongoing covering up, are indeed very costly for the country as a whole. The Foreign Minister's statement to the visiting UN group on disappearances last September, citing the excavations in Jaffna, that there are no mass graves there, is again a costly blunder, which will not impress anyone except the die-hard chauvinists in Colombo. The issue is after all, not mass graves in Jaffna, but hundreds of unaccounted disappearances. Such statements go to show that after five years there is no clearly thought out policy or strategy within the Government to address the Tamil problem.

Instead, we are today being treated to re-enactments of conspiracy theories like **Jayewardene's** Naxalite plot of 1982. These are unnecessarily divisive and cannot bring any good. **Jayewardene** used his Naxalite story to sabotage democracy. In 1982 with a five-sixths majority in Parliament and undated resignation letters of MPs in his pocket, he seemed all-powerful. But this set off a series of destructive processes and by 1988, he was a broken man hoping that the Indian Army would keep him in power. This should not be forgotten.

Unfortunately, the recent unquestioning drift in the Press and a section of the NGOs towards the UNP has left them with few arguments to resist a similar abuse of power by the present Government. These groups which are essentially watchdog bodies should get back to creating room for raising concerns of the ordinary people and so reform the political culture in this country. Watchdogs perform badly in the clothes of power brokers. Their task is to uphold morality in public life. A country can survive the depredations of terrorists, but not state functionaries who descend to the level of terrorists.