

The Politics of Untruth & The Survival of the Tamils

- by Rajan Hoole

The eager return of large numbers of civilians to Jaffna city and surroundings carries a simple message which elite Tamil nationalists have found hard to swallow. Quite independently of whether they trusted or did not trust the Sri Lankan army, they wanted to be home. It was far from their considered wisdom to make a 'miraculous exodus' to the Vanni, so as to make an ideological point for their 'Leaders'. Also increasingly difficult to swallow has been the fact that the ordinary Tamil people desperately wanted to give any prospect of an honourable peace a chance. Peace for them was not a utopian nationalist programme in pursuit of which they were prepared to throw away their children and those simple ordinary things that made life worth living. It is also for peace with justice that the Sinhalese and Eastern Tamils in particular voted resoundingly in 1994.

As to why this peace has eluded us, we owe it to the people to examine the disproportionately influential role exercised by the elite on their fate. The influence of the elite in imposing or prolonging an unwanted war, including the conscription of children through psychological pressure, has been employed without a sense of responsibility and without having to face the consequences. Instead of trying to understand the totalitarian phenomenon the LTTE represents and its overall destructive impact on the community, it has been portrayed as the protector of the Tamils. Its failures have been explained away as mere 'political mistakes' which are attributable to the virulence of the 'Sinhalese State'. Moreover, their general failure to tell the truth about its intrinsic nature, has served to confuse outsiders. Within the community, it has helped to further repression and stifle dissent in order to keep up appearances, and to deny the community all healthier options.

Towards total internal censorship

As responsible agents for our own community it is not our task to give trivial explanations for the LTTE phenomenon by citing the flawed and even homicidal tendencies of the Sri Lankan state. It is but for us to examine and determine our responses so as to build a society that is stronger and fairer. It is the contrary that has taken place. Increasingly the damage we have been doing to ourselves is qualitatively far greater than the physical destruction caused by the Sri Lankan forces. To equate deprived and suicidally motivated youth with the strength of the community is a piece of tragic hypocrisy. A cause that is reasonable in itself needs no systematic falsehood for its justification.

The 'Tamil Voice', published by a group of well-placed Tamils in the USA, in its issue of September 1990 led with the massacre of Muslims in two Kattankudy mosques headlined, 'A Diabolical Conspiracy'. Calling the act 'cruel' and 'dastardly' the TV fully exploited the Sri Lankan state's reputation for skull-duggery, then at a peak, to cleverly argue that the killers were government vigilante groups. But to the people of the area, both Muslims and Tamils, there was never any doubt that the LTTE was responsible.

Although massacres of Tamils by the Sri Lankan forces was shifting the ground, there were then, in 1990, considerable reservations about the LTTE among Tamil expatriates. In the same issue of Tamil Voice, Wakeley Paul excoriated those Tamils "who were tired and disillusioned [with the LTTE's responsibility for the war] and would do anything for peace". These Tamils, said Paul, accused other expatriates of "needlessly fuelling the flames of violence", and advocated that "all

patriotic expatriates must return and join the fray". Paul answered the latter sensitive point by pointing to the role of Western Jewry in the creation of Israel. He asked: "Did those who fought the battle for nationhood of Israel urge every Jew to return and join the struggle? Or, did they instead seek the help of the rich and comfortable expatriates in America and Europe to use their influence to get their governments to help create, sustain and nurture them?...did they ask their expatriates to return[sic] to Israel and crowd them out?... the expatriates can feed and strengthen the movement while the locals fight [sic]."

Only, alas, very few of the much abused locals had the choice to decide whether to be in Wakeley Paul's position or in the position of those whom he purported to 'feed and strengthen'. Anyhow some sop was offered to those concerned about the life and limb of fellow Tamils at home. The back cover of the issue gave a US State Department number to ring and express their concern about the action of the Sri Lankan forces.

The true nature of what was being imposed on the hapless people at home was however made clear by T.Balasingam writing in the Tamil Voice of Summer 1993: "...all niceties of democratic discussion and relaxation of effort would have been suicidal for them [the LTTE] and the Tamils for whom they fought. Ruthless measures and even enforced sacrifices were considered necessary to oppose Sinhala might. It was a case of 'all is fair in love and war'".

Censorship today

What is perhaps most dangerous at this time is that for once when the people returning to Jaffna have openly signalled their disillusionment with our politics, the elite are largely governed by nationalist sentiment that has proved so destructive. After 20 years of a liberation struggle, it is with a sense of initial relief (an understatement perhaps) that large numbers of people are returning to an area now under Sri Lankan army control. Instead of questioning past assumptions, there is now a fairly noticeable tendency for Tamil intellectuals to take refuge in further unreality. It is as if some invisible springs impel us to think and act in an essentially dishonest manner.

For a good example of how large numbers of leading Tamils are ensnared into dissembling, take the recent publication, 'Victims of War in Sri Lanka: A Quest for a Health Consensus'. The volume contained papers presented at a London conference in which the Medical Institute of Tamils (MIOT) was the main organiser. With the publication and release were associated some of the most successful medical men among the Tamils, some of whom were privately very critical of the LTTE. The editors named in the volume were outstanding Tamil men in the medical profession.

The 'Historical Background' in the volume reads rather like the report, 'the Massacre of civilians', presented to parliament by the Deputy Minister for Defence last February. In the latter, nearly all the 3000 or so victims referred to are Sinhalese, with no mention of the tens of thousands of Tamil victims. In the former, for example, the LTTE's brutal crackdown on fellow Tamil groups and civil society in 1986, accompanied by half dead burning bodies at junctions and killing of prisoners, is glossed over in the following terms: " 1986: State repression and violence intensify in the Tamil Homeland; all-out war between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamils. LTTE emerges dominant among Tamil guerilla groups, and takes effective control of Jaffna peninsula..." Unlike the Deputy Defence Minister's, this account comes from the 'healing profession' who generally subscribe to the cant that they are 'above politics'.

A key paper in the volume dealt with what is perhaps the most serious problem in the North-East: Victims of conflict related trauma. The author presented several grievous examples of external violence, together with internal violence. The latter raise some morally painful questions that are crucial for the community. Of the two most telling cases, one dealt with a 12 year old, who was brainwashed by the LTTE and sent to massacre people in presumably the Muslim village of Eravur. The traumatised child recalled how he had smashed the head of an infant and then stabbed the wailing mother. Another case dealt with a boy who was used in torturing fellow Tamils. Both were in a state of utter breakdown. These cases were either excised or rendered tame by the censor. In another place the reference to 'Tiger militants' was changed to 'Tiger freedom fighters'. Now, I am prepared to accept that the editors named are not responsible for this. But they should have been more sharp as signs of manipulation were evident at the September 1994 conference itself. Finally, the 'Victims of war' have become secondary to giving a facelift to a bankrupt cause.

I could imagine that for the official editors of the volume to come out into the open and say that they have been manipulated and used, is a decision that requires considerable courage. If they do not do it and keep up appearances instead, they effectively become part of the web. This gives a picture of how large numbers of Tamils have got caught up in the LTTE web- a situation different from 1990.

In this context, one must understand how difficult it is for young school children to say 'no' to LTTE recruiters giving them a distorted history and confronting them with taunts to their self-respect. How distressing for teachers and parish priests who know that within about two years, the child recruit would come home a corpse for a cause it hardly understood- a cause from which the elders maintain a safe distance after paying it lip-service? How agonising for parents who often rushed to their children's school en-masse as soon as they heard that LTTE recruiters had arrived? The parents often dragged their children home or carried them on their shoulders. These were among the 'ruthless measures and enforced sacrifices' required of the people at home so that they live out the script for a drama relished from Western capitals.

Peace talks to Exodus

The recent peace talks (early 1995) under the PA government gave rise to some responses from the Tamil elite ranging from Bishops to the professional elite and scholars, who showed themselves to be very intelligent in a convoluted way. To take one aspect, President Chandrika Kumaratunge's stated intention of peace with a generous political solution went down well with the people. The Government wanted the LTTE to agree to date for political talks. But the LTTE without responding to that only wanted to talk about the flow of goods into Jaffna. The LTTE's bizarre response to the call for political talks came by proxy with remarkable uniformity from diverse sections of the elite: "Instead of trying to solve the problem, the Government is using Machiavellian schemes to divide the Tamils from the Tigers. We want our fundamental rights (i.e. petrol, diesel, cement etc.) before political rights". The simple fact that the Government could hardly divide the Tamils from the Tiger leadership as long as both were united in wanting the same thing, was disregarded. Once more war was inflicted on the Tamil people.

I have been associated with the report on the Jaffna Exodus of November-December 1995 by UTHR (Jaffna). Unlike in the case of prisoners held by the LTTE and their gross mistreatment, there were hundreds of thousands of witnesses to the events of the Exodus. Yet our report was so unpalatable to many elite Tamils outside Jaffna, that they, along with the LTTE leader, opted for the big lie. Quite often those who arrived in Colombo after the gruelling exodus, found

themselves snubbed as soon as they began to talk about their experience. No Tamil or Tamil backed paper published in Colombo came anywhere near the truth about the Exodus, despite their pretensions to reflect Tamil interests.

DBS Jeyaraj

Another event which should have shaken any residual complacency within the Tamil establishment is also in danger of being swept under the carpet. This pertains to the use of thuggery and intimidation to stop the publication of the Toronto based 'Manchary'. Jeyaraj, the editor, wanted to maintain his reputation as a professional journalist and publish a journal that would carry credibility with a wide cross-section of readers. In the past he had bent over backwards not to offend the LTTE. But even this would not satisfy the LTTE. Jeyaraj has displayed immense courage in coming out with a public statement of the facts of his persecution. Not surprisingly even the Tamil newspaper for which Jeyaraj had worked in Colombo has not reported on his predicament. He is a rather lonely man, who is likely to be snubbed by Tamil editors and intellectuals as were the victims of the Jaffna Exodus. On the other hand the experience of the Sinhalese of the politics of their own elite has many similarities with that of Tamils.

The South & Tamil priorities

A salient feature of the crisis in this country is that the same Sinhalese elite outlook that regarded ordinary Tamils with contempt, when challenged, treated the ordinary Sinhalese in the same manner. This was made clear during the recent JVP uprising and in the tacit complicity of this class with the depraved workings of the state security apparatus. The real issue for this class has nothing primarily to do with Sinhalese or Tamils. It surfaces in the financial columns under the euphemism 'economic freedom', as distinct from the 'economic totalitarianism' of the Bandaranayake government of 1970-1977. Ethnic chauvinism is a legitimising ideology which attempts to turn the ordinary Sinhalese people into storm troopers and colonists to enforce the 'economic freedom' of this class. In this light, it is not difficult to understand the hostility to any real devolution of power that in general comes from the Sinhalese commercial and professional classes, and the mainline press.

Following the violence the ordinary Sinhalese masses had been through, what they signalled by their vote for peace and human rights at the 1994 elections was that they had grave doubts about this game. There was also a new openness in trying to understand the Tamil problem. When the new PA Government went ahead with judicial probes into past violations by the State, it was scorned by influential sections of the mainline press joined by the present UNP leader. What has surfaced over the years, together with recent commission hearings, strongly suggest that his motives were far from being disinterested or impersonal.

Even if only a fraction of the testimony given to the Batalanda and Athulathmudali Murder commissions stand up to scrutiny, it would amount to a severe indictment of the mainline media for passing over these dark deeds mostly in silence. These characters with their roots in the world of crime and murder are often featured by political columnists as partaking of a P.G.Wodehouse type comedy, thus glossing over the underlying menace. It is revealing of the establishment of which the mainline press is part. Concern even for the Sinhalese people is thus a sham.

The election of the government led by Chandrika Kumaratunge was an opportunity not just for the ordinary Sinhalese, but also for the Tamils. Not to achieve a great deal perhaps, but at

least to end the war, confine the security forces to barracks, to create conditions where judicial hearings into past violations will have their full impact, and to cut the ruling interests down to size. The government's sincerity is not a question to be posed passively, but is rather to be affirmed through constant political agitation.

The priority for a responsible and benign Tamil leadership was to acknowledge the common interest with the ordinary Sinhalese people, end the violence, and act in a way to win their confidence and remove their doubts. But the suicide attack on a naval ship and the killing of Gamini Dissanayake in late 1994 were calculated to do the opposite, as was the recommencement of the war in April 1995, murder of Sinhalese villagers and attacks in Colombo. The initiative was thus handed back to the discredited chauvinist establishment in Colombo and the armed forces. The result was hurtful to the ordinary Tamils and Sinhalese alike. It was not another 'mistake', it is but the stuff of the dominant streak in Tamil politics.

A moral crisis

To those who may feel uncomfortable, I am addressing that aspect of matters which we as Tamils are best able to determine. If we could change for the better, that in itself would be a great step forward. We have reached a point where, as far as the elite are concerned, everything about them reeks with falsehood. Most of their actions speak of a dual agenda. There is no relation of truth between positions addressed to different audiences. Most critically we have reached a point where there is no trust. The sense of identity forged by the experience of communal violence and discrimination is all but broken. This is where our politics has brought us. Neither the church, the medical nor teaching profession has come out honourably.

On the matter of trust, take the Medical Institute of Tamils. The motivation was essentially good, and most of the participants meant well. Doctors from the government service in this country contributing scholarly papers to the September 1994 conference lent it authority. But against their wishes or wisdom, and certainly to their embarrassment, an ideological twist has been given to the conference by some in crucial positions which defeats the purpose.

This reflects insensitivity and untrustworthiness among friends and colleagues at the highest levels of society. From one perspective, the young men with guns did no more than carry the failings of their peers to an extreme. We need to urgently ask what went wrong with us? The egoistic vanity of society at the upper levels seems to accompany the physical destruction of the ordinary people.

It is good to remind ourselves where we stand after 20 years of struggle. Only a small proportion have succeeded in establishing themselves abroad as secure expatriates. A much larger number, perhaps 30% of what would have been the natural population of Jaffna, live as refugees in the West. A few pursue unscrupulous activities and many more are disillusioned and cynical about the struggle and face a great deal of uncertainty. The uncertainty also leads to ambivalence about desirability of peace at home. The bulk of the people at home however are worn down and feel let down by everyone: For all the suffering imposed on them, the end of the road for them, not just metaphorically, seems to be to spend hours in a queue like beggars to receive rations from the Sri Lankan Army. The only strength we now have to boast of seems to lie in one individual leader, who insists that all others be weak and powerless.

Thankfully, there are also many exceptions who, though part of our history, have kept their values and sanity. Dr&Dr(Mrs) Deivendran, both long serving doctors in Jaffna, wrote these

plaintive words recently to a Colombo paper from their isolation in Pt Pedro:"...it is heart breaking to see many valuable lives on both sides of the great divide being lost in this war. This beautiful country of ours has the resources necessary to be a paradise on earth for all of us if we can get together...it appears that it is essential that a bridge of understanding is immediately built between the Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims..."

How refreshingly different from the Tamil Voice and their ilk?

Tamil times