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Pirapaharan, Chapter 21 The Split of the LTTE

by **T. Sabaratnam**; published December 3, 2003



21. The Split in the LTTE

The Uma- Urmila Affair

Pirapaharan could not believe his ears when his colleagues told him that Uma Maheswaran was having sex with Urmila. When convinced, he thundered: The chairman is flouting the code of conduct he is expected to strictly enforce.

Pirapaharan was instrumental in bringing Uma into the LTTE and making him its chairman. That earned him strong criticism. An outsider had been brought in and made the leader, his senior colleagues grumbled. They murmured that that was Pirapaharan's second mistake. The first was when he made Chetti Thanabalasingham the leader of the TNT. Chetti cheated him of the robbed money and then turned a police informer. Pirapaharan trusted Chetti because he was a man of action and Pirapaharan adored action.

He took in Uma into the LTTE because he displayed total commitment to armed revolt and because Amirthalingam prodded



Late PLOTE leader, Uma Maheswaran
Uma Maheswaran

him to take him. Uma was the secretary of the Colombo branch of the Tamil United Liberation Front-controlled Tamil Youth Forum and was very active in his work. Pirapaharan decided to make Uma the leader because he was 10 years his elder, possessed extensive knowledge of revolutionary movements and was fluent in the English and Tamil languages. Uma was a good talker, which quality Pirapaharan lacked.

Pirapaharan took Uma to the central committee meeting in mid-1978, introduced him to the others and proposed him as chairman. He told the committee they could make use of Uma's international connections and his communication skills. Uma swore that he would abide by the code of conduct which banned family life, sex, joining or starting rival movements when members leave the LTTE, alcohol and smoking.

Pirapaharan told Uma to resign the chairman post when he was convinced of the truth of the charge against Uma. He thundered, "You are the chairman. If you flout the code of conduct, will others obey? I don't want you to destroy the movement. Please leave."

Uma refuted the charge. He maintained that his enemies had framed him. He refused to resign, saying he was not guilty.

Pirapaharan declined to accept Uma's plea. He summoned a meeting of the central committee in late 1979, by when the LTTE leadership had shifted to Chennai due to the hunt of militants launched by Brigadier Weeratunga, and the committee gave Uma two options: either get married or resign the post of chairman. Uma refused to do either. The central committee then decided to expel Uma. Nagarajah, Para and Iyer, the other members of the central committee, supported Uma's ouster. They held with Pirapaharan that the chairman should be above suspicion. "Even if there is a specter of suspicion the chairman must resign," Nagarajah argued.

Pirapaharan told Anita Prathap in his first interview to the media in 1984, "A leader of a revolutionary movement should commit himself totally to the discipline of the organization. If a leader violates the basic rules and principles then there will be chaos and the organization will crumble."

He also told Anita Prathap that he viewed the problem as a conflict between Uma Maheswaran and the Tiger movement. He said. " I am in no way responsible for the problem. It was Maheshwaran who created the issue. Uma Maheshwaran violated the rules of our movement and as a disciplinary action he was expelled by the central committee. Being the founder of the

movement and the person who appointed Maheshwaran as the chairman I had no other alternative but to uphold the decision of the central committee."



Anita Pratap

Uma refused to resign. That led to a lengthy internal debate. Some of the senior members thought that Pirapaharan should not be a purist. He should give in, in certain circumstances. Pirapaharan was adamant: "There is no give and take in matters concerning discipline. Every one must fall in line."

In desperation, one day he rang up the London office and poured scorn on Uma. He told Krishnan, one of the London representatives, that Uma was unworthy to the Eelam cause. "An undisciplined leader cannot carry with him the people in this struggle," he said. Krishnan said the problem could be sorted out and offered to send his colleague Ramachandran (Anton Raja) to help mend the matter.

Krishnan preferred a settlement. He and Ramachandran had just then gone round the London offices of the Third World revolutionary movements and had briefed them on the LTTE and the Eelam cause. He had introduced Uma Maheswaran as the leader of the LTTE. "We cannot go round again and tell them that we had chucked the leader because he had illicit sex with a cadre," Krishnan pleaded.

Ramachandran told Pirapaharan their predicament when they met in Chennai. "Is it a big problem?" Ramachandran asked Pirapaharan. Pirapaharan was furious. He said, "For you people who live in London it is not a major problem. Here, in our society, it is a serious problem. Who will permit their daughters to join a movement in which leaders molest their cadres?" Kandiah Urmila Devi, Urmila in brief, was LTTE's first woman cadre. She was active in the Colombo branch of the Tamil Youth Forum and had worked closely with Uma. She was admitted into the LTTE on the recommendation of Uma. Ramachandran, whom I met many years later, said he had no answer to Pirapaharan's query. He returned to London.

The London office did not give up its effort to patch up the quarrel. Krishnan decided to make another attempt. He went to Chennai with a mediator, Balasingham, who had earned Pirapaharan's respect through his pamphlets which gave theoretical justification for the Eelam armed struggle. By that time, the dispute had worsened, as Uma, who first disobeyed the central committee decision to expel him, had later claimed that he was the head of the LTTE and that his was the real LTTE. The action of Uma's confidant, Suntharam (S. Sivashanmugamoorthy) who removed arms from one of LTTE's hideouts, proved that Uma meant business. It infuriated Pirapaharan. He quickly transferred the weapons in the other hideouts to fresh locations preventing them falling into Uma's hands.

Krishnan flew to Chennai through Mumbai with Balasingham and his second wife, Adele, an Australian sociology student at South Bank University in UK, (Balasingham's first wife, a Tamil, had died of kidney failure) to settle the dispute in late



LSBU

1979. The LTTE was keeping a low profile in Tamil Nadu at that time. It was functioning as a clandestine organization. The Balasinghams were not welcomed at the Meeampakkam airport, though Baby Subramaniam and another kept watch of them from a distance standing with the crowd. Krishnan hired a taxi and the three went to a lodge where Krishnan booked Balasingham a dirty, stuffy room with a filthy, leaking toilet. Krishnan then vanished to meet Pirapaharan.

Balasingham Meets Pirapaharan

Balasingham had two meetings on the night of his arrival. The first was with Uma Maheswaran and his group. The conversation revolved round the pamphlets Balasingham had authored for the LTTE. The document on the LTTE had been written by Balasingham at the request of Uma. Balasingham sent the draft of each chapter to Uma who made the necessary alterations and sent them back for finalization. It was a formal meeting.

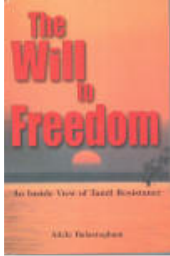
The meeting with Pirapaharan was different. It was a heart-to-heart exchange. It was a meeting that cemented an enduring relationship between two historical figures. It took place around mid-night. Pirapaharan and Baby Subramaniam arrived without any fanfare. Pirapaharan was dressed in trousers and a light-coloured printed shirt. Baby Subramaniam was dressed in his usual white verti and national. Baby carried his trademark over-stuffed bag, full of all sorts of documents and political literature. Adele, in her monumental work The Will to Freedom documented the discussion, recorded her impressions and commented upon the traits of personality that made Pirapaharan one of the greatest guerrilla leaders in the world (Pages 41-46). She recorded, "I must admit that I was taken aback by how young and innocent these two 'terrorists' looked. Indeed their appearance belied their reputation. Both were short, neat little men who looked like butter wouldn't melt in their mouths."

Pirapaharan was dressed neatly. Adele, who later moved with Pirapaharan for many years, commented: "Meticulous grooming is Pirapaharan's hallmark. Dressing is an event for Pirapaharan, not a necessary practice to be completed and out of the way quickly." He was fully armed. Adele comments: "Only a careful observer would have noticed the bulge from the weapons he had tucked into his waist and covered by the shirt that hung loosely over him. Cleverly too, the buttons

disguised a row of press studs sown underneath which allowed them to tear open, giving him easy and quick access to his weapons.”

Pirapaharan’s young face was clean shaved, clear and bright. He shaves daily which makes him appear fresh. His huge black penetrating eyes made Adele to record thus: “Indeed one gets the feeling that he is peering right through to your soul and it is this depth in his eyes which mirrors his mind and thinking, too. On several occasions in our long relationship Pirapaharan’s eyes have told many stories.”

The discussions, which lasted from midnight to early morning, were mainly, in Adele’s words “a mutual sizing up exercise.” They tried to assess each other. They assessed each other’s commitment to the cause of Eelam. Pirapaharan subjected



by Adele Balasingham

Balasingham to a thorough facial scan and to intellectual probing. He watched intently with his piercing eyes every movement of Balasingham’s facial muscles. He questioned Balasingham about his personal background and beliefs. He questioned Balasingham about his political writings and his translations of Che Guevara and Mao Zedong. They ended up by liking each other. They struck a historical relationship that grew stronger with time.

Balasingham rounded up the meeting with the question of patching up the Uma-Pirapaharan dispute and about the possibility of his conducting some classes for LTTE cadres. Pirapaharan readily agreed about holding classes. He promised that he would attend them. But on the question of the patch-up, he was adamant: What patching up with a man of loose morals? He asked and answered: That would damage the armed struggle.

He said that the Tamils were in a weak position. They were being pushed to a position of slavery. The Sinhalese rulers were utilizing the armed might of the state and the numerical superiority of the Sinhala mob to subjugate the Tamil people. Peaceful protest had failed. Non-violence had been spurned. Democracy had been prostituted to impose the will of the numerically-strong Sinhalese on the minority communities. The only option left for the Tamils was armed struggle.

Balasingham readily concurred. Then Pirapaharan won over Balasinghsam to his side with the following enunciation:

The Sri Lankan state is the oppressor. The state is in the hands of Sinhala chauvinists.

Sri Lankan state is using its armed organs, the police and the armed forces, as its tools of oppression. Thus, the police and the armed forces are the immediate enemies of the Tamil people. They are crushing Tamil resistance, peaceful and violent, and reducing the Tamil people to subservience.

The Tamils should be made to realize that the police and the armed forces are their enemies. They should be made to fight them.

Tamil people should be mobilized to enter the armed struggle. Doing that through educational campaigns and propaganda would be time-consuming and wasteful. Get the police and the army to do that work for the Tamils. Hit hard at the police and the armed forces. They would attack the people. That will make the people patriotic. People would flock to the militants seeking protection.

Showing to the people that the police and the armed services are the enemies of the people and the militants are their protectors would build up the armed struggle.

Maintaining people’s trust is important and difficult. Discipline is the crux of the whole thing. Protectors should not be immoral. Then the entire resistance movement will crumble.

Balasingham was converted to Pirapaharan’s viewpoint. But he pursued his mission of patching up the dispute. He told Uma and Urmila to admit their illicit affair and get married, in keeping with the original central committee decision. Uma and Urmila declined. Then, Balasingham suggested that they need not marry immediately, but could do so in the future. They were not agreeable for that, either. They argued that acceptance of that solution would amount to owning guilt. Uma and his supporters accused Balasingham of instigating Pirapaharan against them. They accused Pirapaharan of providing better accommodation to Balasingham and buying him over. Pirapaharan found during the meeting that the accommodation provided for Balasingham was poor and sent one of his colleagues round to find them a better room in a better hotel. Adele, in particular, was satisfied with the new hotel and thanked Pirapaharan for the concern he showed to their comfort.

Concern about the comforts of his cadres is one of the characteristics that distinguish Pirapaharan from other militant leaders. He paid special attention in providing his cadres good food, clean water and a hygienic living environment. Sri Lankan army commanders had commented appreciatively about this. “That is one of the factors that motivated the Tiger fighters,” a senior army officer said.

Two incidents related to me by Arulpiragasam (Arular) would throw additional light. He said once he went to the LTTE camp at Poonthoddam long after lunch. Pirapaharan went into the jungle, returned with two wild fowls, and cooked them for him. The other was his habit of drinking boiled water. He encouraged his cadres to do so. Pirapaharan always drank from the bottle of water he carried with him. It contained boiled water. He did that as a measure of security.

Pirapaharan met Balasingham very often and exchanged views. He also attended the classes Balasingham conducted at Senjee Ramachandran's room in the Tamil Nadu legislator's living quarters. Uma, too, attended those classes. Adele recalls that Pirapaharan listened to the lectures without interrupting Balasingham while Uma kept disturbing him with a volley of questions. "Uma went to the extent of challenging the lecturer. That irritated Bala," Adele has written. That difference in their approach was one of the factors that swayed Balasingham towards Pirapaharan. Balasingham returned to UK after completing his lectures without settling the Uma-Pirapaharan dispute.

Pirapaharan kept pressing Uma to quit the LTTE. Some senior members who got fed up with the row persuaded Urmila to meet Pirapaharan and make up. Their attempt at rapprochement ended in failure. Pirapaharan spat at her feet and Urmila cried. "Why did you bring me here. Do I deserve this treatment," she wailed. The seniors wanted Pirapaharan to apologize. Pirapaharan refused. Uma continued to resist Pirapaharan's demand to quit and fomented dissension within the LTTE.

Pirapaharan returned to Jaffna in early 1980 to handle the brewing revolt. Uma had instigated his colleagues to revive the old disputes: mode of struggle and internal democracy within the organization. The worn out dispute that mass mobilization should precede attacks on the police and the army was revived. The dispute about the democratization of the decision-taking process was also renewed.

Uma also added a new twist. He accused Pirapaharan of dancing to the dictates of Amirthalingam. It was true that Pirapaharan had a soft corner for Amirthalingam. They liked each other. Amirthalingam respected Pirapaharan's commitment to the Eelam cause and his capacity to wage an armed struggle. Pirapaharan had built a special relationship with Amirthalingam. He admired the immense sacrifices Amirthalingam had made for the cause of the Tamil people. He respected the devotion Amirthalingam had displayed for the Eelam cause. "It was that common factor that binds us together and our relationship would last as long as that common interest lasts," Pirapaharan explained to his critics.

Pirapaharan's critics also raked up past events to discredit Pirapaharan. The murders of Patkunarajah and Michael of Batticaloa were portrayed as Pirapaharan's misdeeds. Patkunarajah drove Alfred Duraiappah's car in which the assailants escaped after killing him. He played a key role in forging LTTE- EROS links during the formative years of Tamil militancy. He and Michael were killed for violating discipline and the central committee took that collective decision. Nagarajah, who later tried to put the entire blame on Pirapaharan, supported the decision. Insiders say that Nagarajah took Patkunarajah to Vavuniya, where he was murdered.

The central committee met twice, in Jaffna and Vavuniya, to discuss the crisis after Pirapaharan returned to Jaffna. Both meetings were stormy. At the first meeting, held in Jaffna, a new 5-member central committee was elected. Pirapaharan demanded that he be given an overriding say in the conduct of the organization. Others opposed it. They said all decisions should be taken collectively. Pirapaharan derisively remarked, "Then we will end up like a political party, all talk and no work."

At the Vavuniya meeting Nagarajah, Para and Iyer suggested that they transform the LTTE into a mass organization. That was too much for Pirapaharan. He felt all his plans to build up an armed resistance movement crumbling. He felt disgusted. With tears in his eyes, he announced in choked voice: "I have done so much for the movement and no one recognizes. I am quitting the LTTE." He started wailing out. Others were shocked. They got hold of him and prevented him from walking out. Pirapaharan refused to listen to them. One of them offered him a pistol as a parting memento. Pirapaharan declined to accept it. He walked away, empty-handed, determined to make fresh history. He walked to an uncle's house in Tinnaveli. He spent a few days with his uncle planning his future.

Bereft of men and weapons Pirapaharan knew he could not carry on alone. He decided to collect a group of devoted men and some arms and to forge a working alliance with TELO, which his relatives headed. He got his uncle to arrange a meeting Thangathurai, Kuttimani and Nadesuthasan in his house. He told Thangathurai at this emotional reunion, "I left you as a thamby (younger brother). I have come back as a thamby." Kuttimani suggested that Pirapaharan be given some arms and allowed to operate independently. Thangathurai decided to take him back and worked out a collaborative



Meenakshi Temple, Madurai

arrangement which permitted both groups to operate together. He also placed Pirapaharan in charge of the planned military training project in Tamil Nadu. Pirapaharan accepted.

Pirapaharan went to Trichy and started the training camp. He and his associates cleared a grazing ground in the bosom of

a forest and built little cottages. They cooked their food and slept on mats. They led a spartan life. He set up another training camp in Madurai. He obtained the services of retired Army officers to conduct the training classes.

Pirapaharan's mind was not at rest. He was not content with organizing and training someone else's group. He wanted to act independently. He wanted a group loyal to him. Santhosam, a Jaffna university graduate from Ariyalai, who later functioned as LTTE's Trincomalee commander, told me that Pirapaharan had told him that he learnt two important lessons from his experiences during 1978-1980. They were:

- He should build an organization absolutely loyal to him.
- He should have the overriding say in running the organization.

Santhosam said Pirapaharan used to hark back to the immense troubles he faced with the men who joined the LTTE in its initial years. "Most of them were talkers. They will split hairs over everything. Each one of them would pull in a different direction. No guerrilla force would succeed with such men," Pirapaharan had told them. Santhosam said Pirapaharan used to mock the short-lived Tamil Liberation Organization (TLO) as an organization of leaders. TLO, led by Muthucumarasamy, comprised mainly those who considered social reform the vital part of the freedom struggle.

Pirapaharan went round meeting some of his old colleagues who were loyal to him. Baby Subramaniam. Pandithar, Ragavan, Kittu and Seelan, Sellakili, were with him. He also started collecting weapons. The first weapon he bought was a .38 pistol. He bought it from an Indian for 300 rupees. Then he acquired a G-3 rifle from a retired Indian army officer for



Colt .38 pistol

3000 rupees. He raised that amount with great difficulty. Kittu, who was involved in that purchase, recalled in an interview to the LTTE's official journal *Viduthalai Puligal* that an exasperated Pirapaharan had declared: "We cannot go on like this. We must, in future, wrest our weapons from our enemy."

Kittu had told the journal that that was a major policy decision. From then on robbing weapons was made an integral part of attacks.

With Pirapaharan busy in rebuilding himself and Thangathurai and Kuttimani concentrating their attention on training, 1980 was incident-free. This deluded Jayewardene and Amirthalingam. Jayewardene thought that Weeratunga's Operation Round Up had decimated the Tamil militant movements and Amirthalingam thought the youths have been weakened and would fall in line.

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Chapter 22. The Burning of the Jaffna Library

To be posted on December 10, 2003

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