

Pirapaharan

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8. First Military Operation

Pirapaharan Returns

Pirapaharan did what Sivakumaran failed to do. He killed Alfred Duraiappah. Sivakumaran's death was one of the factors that induced Pirapaharan to return to Jaffna, the scene of action. With the death of Sivakumaran, the resistance movement had slackened. Pirapaharan wanted that whipped up again.

By that time, he had teamed up with Chetti, who was with him when he founded the Tamil New Tigers (TNT). Chetti was arrested, but in mid-1973 he escaped from the Anuradhapura prison and went to Chennai. Periya Sothi, with whom Pirapaharan was living at Kodampakkam, objected to Pirapaharan rejoining Chetti and got Thangathurai and Kuttimani to intervene. Pirapaharan refused to listen. His concern at that time was to resume the resistance movement and he found in Chetti the man of action he required.

Pirapaharan returned to Jaffna in July 1974, one and a half months after Sivakumaran's death. He had a hard time. He had to find new hideouts, since the earlier places were known to the police. He had no money. His earlier friends had been arrested. Those who remained outside were scared to help him. Police hunts for militants had peaked. Tamil policemen in charge of that chase were relentless. Inspectors Bastiampillai, Pathmanathan and Thamocharampillai had earned kudos for intelligence work. "They would catch the boys somehow," was the reputation they had built for themselves. The government had told them to be hard on the Tamil militants. Kumarasuriyar, in particular, was out to nip Tamil militancy in the bud. The militants stood in his path of winning the Tamils over to the government side.

The government, facing the surge in popularity of the J. R. Jayewardene-led UNP opposition, was anxious to keep the TUF on its side. Sirimavo Bandaranaike announced her government's decision to open a university campus in Jaffna, to appease the Tamils who wanted a Tamil university to be set up in Trincomalee. She announced that she would personally open the campus.

It was a tactical political announcement. The youths saw through it. They said the government's real objective was to kill the Tamil demand for a university in Trincomalee and to drive a wedge between northern and eastern Tamils. The University authorities acted in a hurry. They appointed Prof. K. Kailasapathy as the president of the Jaffna Campus and selected Parameswara College founded by Sir

Ponnampalam Ramanathan as its premises. Srimavo Bandaranaike went on an official visit to Jaffna on 6 October 1974, to declare Jaffna University Campus open. Militant youths called upon the public to boycott the opening ceremony and all other functions organized by government supporters to welcome the prime minister. They organized a black flag demonstration. TUF members and its parliamentarians obeyed the decision taken by the militant youths. The decision making power of the Tamil people thus passed into the hands of the Tamil militants.

With Sivakumaran's death and Satyaseelan's arrest two of the four Tamil armed groups ceased to function. With Thangathurai and Kuttimani living in Salem in Tamil Nadu, TELO was practically dormant. With the return of Pirapaharan, the TNT, popularly known as Pirapaharan's group, was the only active resistance group in Jaffna. People obeyed the 20-year-old Pirapaharan's decree and moderate TUF leaders reluctantly followed suit.

Pirapaharan gave Sirimavo Bandaranaike a hot welcome. The TNT exploded over half dozen bombs in different parts of the Jaffna peninsula including Jaffna market, a railway station, Kankesanthurai police station, Communist Party politbureau member V. Ponnambalam's residence. Ponnambalam was the prime minister's interpreter. The explosions did not cause any death or severe damage to property, but created an atmosphere of panic. Several buses were also stoned and torched.

Kumarasuriyar's and Duraiappah's effort to gather a crowd for the official reception the Jaffna branch of the SLFP accorded to the prime minister also failed. Duraiappah made the maximum effort to collect a respectable crowd by transporting his supporters in his car. Sirimavo Bandaranaike's Jaffna visit was a flop and the government was annoyed with the TUF for toeing the line set by the militant youths.

The government was not in a position to show a stiff face to the TUF. The opposition pressure on the government had grown enormously. The government announced the Kankesanthurai by-election and released some of the Tamil youths, both TUF demands. It also took steps to soften the effect of the standardization of marks for university admission by introducing the district quota system. It was introduced on the recommendation of the Pieter Keuneman committee, set up to inquire the Sinhalese charges that Tamil examiners over-marked Tamil answer scripts. The Keuneman committee reported: "Organized manipulation of marks in one whole medium in a deceptive manner is neither possible nor probable," and added media-wise standardization had "contributed to deepening and indeed institutionalizing suspicions between communities and promoting distrust in the fairness or impartiality of public examinations."

The district quota system that came into effect by the end of 1974 introduced the scheme whereby 30 percent of the students were admitted to the university on the basis of merit and 55 percent on the

basis of district quota, with the balance 15 percent of the places reserved for backward districts.

The district quota system, though detrimental to the students from the Jaffna district, benefited Tamils living in other Tamil districts. In 1974 Jaffna's share of university admission shrank to 7 percent, roughly equal to its population ratio. This system benefited students from Vanni, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, and Ampara. It was under the district quota systems that the first student from Kilinochchi entered the university.

The Mandate

The announcement of the Kankesanthurai by-election placed the government in a difficult situation. It found that picking a candidate to oppose Thanthai Chelva was a thorny task. The matter was taken up by Sirimavo Bandaranaike at a weekly cabinet meeting. She said it was certain that the government would lose, but it should lose in a respectful manner. For that it should nominate a common candidate to prevent the split of anti-TUF votes. The cabinet agreed to nominate a Communist Party candidate since the party had a base in Kankesanthurai. The Communist Party had difficulty in persuading V. Ponnambalam to contest. He was reluctant. He told the party politbureau that he should be able to present an alternate political solution to the ethnic problem to be able to counter Thanthai Chelva's demand for a separate state. He was at that time pressing the Communist Party to accept regional autonomy as a solution to the Tamil problem. He was given permission by the party to unofficially place the establishment of autonomous regions in the north and east as an alternative before the people.

Thanthai Chelva asked the electorate of 41,227 voters to give him a mandate to declare two matters:

- that the Tamil people had rejected the unitary 1972 constitution, and
- that the Tamil people had decided to establish a separate state for themselves.

Militant youths joined Thanthai Chelva's campaign band. Pirapaharan and his colleagues campaigned very hard. So did Eelaventhan and Uma Maheswaran, president and secretary of the Colombo branch of the TYF. They visited almost every house in the electorate and told inmates to vote for Tamil Eelam. Eelaventhan says that that was during this campaign Pirapaharan and Uma Maheswaran met for the first time.

The Kankesanthurai by-election was held on 6 February 1975. Thanthai Chelva won with a thumping majority. The percentage polled was 87.09, the highest in any parliamentary election in that electorate. Thanthai Chelva collected 25,927 as against V. Ponnambalam's 9,457 votes. The majority was 16,470 votes. It was said militant youths bodily carried invalids to the polling station.

In his victory speech Thanthai Chelva declared;

Throughout the ages, the Sinhalese and the Tamils in this country lived as distinct sovereign people, till they were brought under the foreign domination. We have for the last 25 years, made every effort to secure our political rights on the basis of equality with the Sinhalese in a united Ceylon.

It is a regrettable fact that the successive Sinhalese governments have used the power, that flows from independence, to deny us our fundamental rights and reduce us to the position of a subject people. These, the governments have been able to do, only by using its discriminatory authority against the Tamils.

I wish to announce to my people and to the country that I consider the verdict at this election as a mandate that the Tamil Eelam nation should exercise the sovereignty already vested in the Tamil people and become free. On behalf of the Tamil United Front, I give you my solemn assurance that, we will carry out this mandate.

Youths raised the victory cry;

**Thamil Eelam is our
Motherland.
Thamil Eelam is our aspiration**

Many rushed to him, slashed their index fingers and put on his forehead *Iratha Thilakam*. (*Iratha*: blood; *Thilakam*: red dot worn on the forehead)

From that day until his death on 5 April 1977, Thanthai Chelva never wavered. In his speeches, he justified the demand for a separate state. To the critics who said that Tamil Eelam would be small in size and population he answered at Kokuvil on May 1975;

Nations much smaller than that of the size and population Tamil Eelam claimed by the Tamils of Sri Lanka are governing and functioning as separate, independent states. As such, why should the Tamils of Sri Lanka not agitate for a separate state where we can govern themselves?

On 2 October 1975 at Kollankadu in Tellipallai Chelvanayagam answered the critics who advocated further talks with the Sinhala governments;

We have talked enough. We have tried our best peacefully for the past 25 years with our Sinhalese brothers to win our legitimate rights. We have had numerous talks with the Sinhalese leaders and several pacts. But when all our efforts proved futile we decided to say "Goodbye" to them and set up a separate state for ourselves.

Armed Groups

While the moderate Tamil leadership, frustrated by the failure of their non-violent political negotiations, shifted their position from a federal solution of an autonomous state within the united Sri Lanka to a separate state, youths who believed in armed struggle started organizing and strengthening themselves. By the beginning of 1975

there were two underground groups in Jaffna and a third was formed in London.

TNT, known as the Pirapaharan Group, was the foremost. It had increased its cadre strength to about 30 able and dedicated youths. It had collected two old and rusted revolvers and a few home-made hand bombs. With those crude bombs TNT had frustrated Kumarasuriya's and Duraiappah's effort to give the prime minister a warm welcome. Chetti was the main man behind that feat. The faith Pirapaharan placed on Chetti seemed fruitful.

Periya Sothi's fear about Chetti was also not unfounded. Chetti robbed Rs. 69,000 from the Tellipallai Multi-Purpose Cooperative Store and kept the money himself. He bought an old car and gave conflicting explanations when his colleagues questioned him about the marked change in his living style. He was arrested in the latter part of 1974.

Chetti's arrest created a difficult situation for Pirapaharan. He had to change his hideouts for he knew that Chetti would 'vomit' everything under appropriate police 'treatment'. Even Pirapaharan did not anticipate the "treatment" police detective Pathmanathan gave, a 'friend' of Chetti later told me. Pathmanathan succeeded in turning Chetti into a police informant.

After Chetti's arrest Pirapaharan was also short of cash. He survived on fruits and the meals his colleagues provided. He would walk in unannounced into the houses of his colleagues, tired and hungry. They would take him to their kitchen and serve him whatever was available. He would eat, sleep in the kitchen for a few hours and walk away. M. N. Narayan Swamy records in his book; Tigers of Lanka (Page 54) this incident: "Once he suffered an attack of jaundice, but he would not go to a doctor; miraculously, and to his friends' surprise, he recovered."

Whenever he was desperate for money, he would send a colleague to his mother or close relatives. His mother, Parvathi, would send whatever cash she could spare, with the comment: "Why is he suffering like this? We brought him up in comfort. He got all he wanted. If he cannot live here ask him to go back and live in Tamil Nadu. We will look after him." When the colleague repeated his mother's comments Pirapaharan smiled.

The other underground group was the Thangathurai group. By this time, Kuttimani was under arrest.



Kuttimani

He was arrested in Tamil Nadu in 1973 following the seizure of his boat filled with detonators by the Sri Lankan navy. He was charged under the Explosive Act and the Passport Act of India and extradited to Colombo. The Dravida Munnetta Kalazha leader Karunanidhi, the chief minister, agreed to the Sri Lankan request for deportation on the charge Kuttimani had master-minded 'retaliatory operations' in Sri Lanka. Kuttimani was brought to Sri Lanka and kept under custody for some time. Thangathurai slipped back to Jaffna and reactivated his group.

In January 1975, a third group was formed after a series of discussions in the London flat of Eliyathamby Ratnasabapaty. K. D. Arudpiragasam, known as Arular, was the other founder. The group's main contribution in 1975 was to make the Tamil problem known worldwide. A group of Tamils demonstrated during the 1975 World Cup at Oval and Manchester grounds, some of them running across the ground holding aloft placards condemning the Sri Lankan government for its atrocities against the Tamil people. Its branch was formed in Jaffna and a military training camp was set up in the Kannati farm in Vavuniya in late 1976.

Yet another armed group was established in mid-1975. The Tamil Youth Forum, founded in 1973, was an organization of about 40 active youths of varied political beliefs. The majority of them were under the control of Amirthalingam. A section of left-oriented youths in the Forum detested taking orders from TUF leaders whom they regarded as half-hearted, tea-cup politicians who were after the power and prestige parliament membership conferred. They wanted the TYF to take up a more active, social reformist character. They accused the TUF of paying lip service to the abolition of the caste system. Their quarrel resulted in the split of the TYF in June 1975, the section led by Mavai Senathirajah, Kasi Aananthan and Vannai Ananthan aligning with the TUF and the other section led by Muthukumaraswamy and Varatharaja Perumal branching away and forming a new organization called Eelam Liberation Organization (ELO).

Destroying Traitors

Pirapaharan decided to take over Sivakumaran's mission of destroying the network of Sirimavo Bandaranaike's collaborators whom they considered traitors. The decision, TNT insiders told me later, was taken in early 1975 soon after Thanthai Chelva obtained the mandate for a separate state. The same source told me that Pirapaharan held a special discussion with the TNT members for this purpose.

At that discussion Pirapaharan waxed eloquently on the history of Sri Lankan Tamils, the glory of the Jaffna kingdom, its fall to the Portuguese, the failure of the Tamil leaders to claim for the Tamils the sovereignty which they lost when the British gave independence to Ceylon and how through the Kankesanthurai by-election they had obtained the mandate to ask for the lost sovereign right to rule themselves. He had vowed, my source said,

That noble task has fallen on our shoulders. It is not an easy task. It's going to be a difficult, lengthy struggle. We will take on that task.

Pirapaharan was then 20 years old. He had in his command a small band of about 30 cadres. His armoury consisted of two revolvers, one of foreign make and the other locally turned out. He had just started the training camp, Poonthoddam, in Vavuniya and was teaching his men to shoot straight.

At that midnight discussion, they chose the target for their first military operation: Mayor Alfred Duraiappah.

The decision was collective. Pirapaharan named the target and spelt out the reasons. The main charge was Duraiappah's destructive role during the Fourth Tamil Research Conference. Next was his effort to accord Sirimavo Bandaranaike a civic welcome soon after the Tamil Conference deaths. Third was his role in building for the government a support base among the Tamil people.

Pirapaharan took charge of the preparatory work. He selected three others to assist him. They were: Kalapathy, Kirupaharan and Patkunarajah. Pirapaharan took upon himself the task of preparing the weapon and shooting Duraiappah. Others were told to track Duraiappah's movements. They found that Duraiappah, a Christian, worshiped Friday mornings at the Varatharajah Perumal Temple at Ponnalai. Duraiappah had talked about his selecting the Ponnalai temple with some of his trusted friends. He had told Rajasuriyar, SLFP organizer of Jaffna town, that that temple was lonely, serene and tranquil. He had told Rajasuriyar that he got peace of mind once he was inside that temple.

On 26 July 1975, the night before the assassination of Alfred Duraiappah, Pirapaharan dropped into a friend's house in Ponnalai, ate the dinner his friend's mother served, and went to bed chatting as usual. The friend observed Pirapaharan pulling out an unloaded revolver and placing it under his pillow. He also kept beside him two

or three boxes.

The friend mocked, "Can you shoot even a crow with this?"
Pirapaharan smiled and said, "Keep quiet. See what happens tomorrow."

The friend later said that Pirapaharan slept sound and left the house before dawn. He went to the tea boutique opposite the temple. Kalapathy, Kirupaharan and Patkunarajah were there. The shop owner told the inquest that the four had their breakfast in his shop and waited outside the temple as if awaiting the arrival of some one.

Duraiappah's car stopped a few meters past the temple entrance. Duraiappah opened the door and stepped out. The boys said, "Vannakam Ayiah" ("Greetings, Sir").
Duraiappah, always friendly, replied, "Vanakkam Thambigal" ("Greetings, Younger Brothers").

Pirapaharan pulled out his revolver and fired. Shots pierced his chest. Blood sprayed. Duraiappah collapsed and died on the spot.

The boys walked to the car, pushed out the driver from the driving seat, and drove away.

The first political murder of the ethnic conflict had been committed. It shocked the Tamils. It shocked the Sinhalese. It shocked Sirimavo Bandaranaike. The armed revolt had begun.

Next:

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