

V.Senthan (40s)

Senthan was taken away from his home in Kachilaimadu by the Tamil Tigers(LTTE) on 14th April 1992. A brilliant mechanical engineer, and a poet in both the Tamil and English languages, Senthan lived simply with his wife and three children.

Though sympathetic to socialist ideals and deeply concerned about ordinary people, Senthan practised these in his life rather than identify with any grouping. He owned a workshop and showed his brilliance as an innovator, working under severe technical limitations. His contribution to keeping civilian life going in wartime Jaffna is considerable. Amongst the jobs handled by him are the fashioning of equipment for the Palmyrah Development Board and boats for the Red Cross. The latter were used to fetch food supplies from ships anchored off Pt Pedro. His workforce was so loyal to him, that through times of divisive and murderous passions he held together men with diverse sympathies, and often, took home less money than his workers. Senthan was one among the handful of professional engineers now active in Jaffna.

At a time when intellectuals emigrated in large numbers (including nearly all Senthan's contemporaries from the University of Ceylon), Senthan remained because of his concern for the ordinary people and his loyalty to his workers.

One aspect of Senthan's abduction is the general crackdown on independently minded persons known to hold views running counter to the LTTE's aspirations of totalitarian legitimacy. The LTTE's detainees include university students, members of literary groups critical of the totalitarian, militarist direction of the Tamil struggle (e.g. Theepori & Peravai), and former Left wing activists. During the last two months about 12 persons from the farming area of Paranthan were taken in by the LTTE. Most of them had contacts with Left groups several years ago. Despite having through repression reduced all dissent in Jaffna to the passive, private and cognitive, the LTTE's actions betray the nervousness of those who distrust their own rhetorical claims.

The other aspect, according to indications, is that a sister of Senthan's is the wife of Dr.K. Sritharan, a leading activist in the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) and a co-author of 'the Broken Palmyra'. The book and reports of the UTHR (Jaffna) have documented human rights violations by the Sri Lankan and Indian states and also the Tamil militant groups. Events have made the LTTE feature prominently in violations by the last category. Sritharan successfully evaded the LTTE's attempts to apprehend him in September 1990 under the cover of the fresh outbreak of hostilities with the Sri Lankan forces.

The brutal and dehumanising conditions of the LTTE's prisoners who are also denied ICRC access have become widely known. Senthan's health is delicate and he was undergoing treatment for asthma, high blood pressure and arthritis.

UTHR (Jaffna)
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Jaffna: The Secret War against Dissent

Civilian casualties from massacres by the Sri Lankan forces and the Tigers, and military casualties, a fraction of the former, consist the quantifiable cost of the war. There is also a massive cost, a direct consequence of the politics, that remains unquantified. Children inducted as practitioners of brute force, political detainees, the distress of the families of the former two, the shocking prevalence of suicide and the general anxiety resulting from actual and anticipated tragedy involving someone dear, form part of the unquantified cost. Underlying this regime and closely twined with the survival of its politics is a relentless suppression of dissent, even in its most passive and legitimate forms.

The LTTE which tries fervently to legitimise itself internationally as not just a liberation group but also as the sole representatives of the Tamil people has found it necessary to hide the extent of its repression. The result has been a secret war conducted within the community with instruments of terror. It has been at its crudest with people at the lower end of the social scale, such as with relatives of members of pro-Indian militant groups fleeing to India in early 1990, or others with mildly compromising connections. Those in the first category were killed summarily in large numbers. With intellectuals having both local and international credibility, the repression involved patiently waiting for the right moment and taking calculated risks, with all the accompanying deceit and attempts at character assassination.

What is dealt with here are events surrounding the UTHR (JAFFNA). Those concerning others have been mentioned in our reports. It also illustrates the agony suffered by families and friends in the event of violations. In the case of persons who are socially inconsequential, the agony could be several times greater. Of course the Sri Lankan forces have brought untold misery in connection with thousands killed and disappeared. The difference is that the Sri Lankan government has long behaved as if it had spurned its claim to legitimately govern the Tamils. The resulting difference between ideological claims and reality has led the Sri Lankan government in international fora and in secret deals to tacitly dilute its legal claims over the Tamils. The LTTE on the other hand aspires to be recognised as the liberator of Tamils as well as their sole legal guardian.

Many dissidents with political and human rights associations had to flee of Jaffna. They left behind many having ties to them as relatives, long standing friends and associates, colleagues and students. Over the last 18 months many persons who were playing a positive but non-political role in Jaffna have been detained, either without reason or on the basis of specious charges, often hinted at through individuals close to the LTTE, but seldom uttered in public. A crackdown is often accompanied by wild rumours calculated to intimidate others. In the case of some students detained, hints of association with

the UTHR (Jaffna) have been made, without saying publicly that it was an offence. But a case is being concocted to make it look an offence.

We had been inhibited from coming out in public in several individual instances, through a fear that harm may be caused to socially committed persons living in Jaffna, functioning under multiple pressures. The time may have come when publicity may be required to protect them as well as those detained.

The ongoing military offensive in Jaffna greatly adds to the danger faced by all detainees.

The UTHR (Jaffna) and the events of 1990/91:

Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, a prominent activist in the UTHR (Jaffna) and co-author of 'the Broken Palmyra' was assassinated on 21st September 1989. Although responsibility was publicly denied by the LTTE 60 days later, on the eve of a public commemoration of Rajani with international delegates in attendance, other menacing moves were set in motion. While jumping the bandwagon of praise for Rajani in quarters where her value was bound to be recognised, a well co-ordinated campaign of character assassination was also launched in expatriate quarters where she was relatively unknown. The LTTE leaflet in Tamil denying responsibility for killing Rajani also contained thinly veiled threats to all forms of dissent. The UTHR (Jaffna) had been documenting human rights violations by state forces as well as militant groups. The LTTE has right along seen its route to legitimacy as lying with suppression of information concerning its violations of human rights rather than securing an observance of human rights.

Knowing the risks involved, Dr. Sritharan, another activist, opted to remain in Jaffna. Following the outbreak of war in June 1990, Sritharan took some precautions with his movements, but threw himself into the work of preparing for the task of protecting civilians and catering for refugees in the wake of a Sri Lankan army advance into Jaffna.

The LTTE began a new bout of repression in August 1990 when the attention of the public was diverted by the terror of aerial bombardment by the Sri Lankan air force. It began with the mass arrest in Vadamaratchi of members of a defunct Left group. A former student leader, whom the LTTE appears to have successfully blackmailed, was one of those set to tail Sritharan. Attempts were made to apprehend him from mid-September. Raids were made on his parents' home and a religious institution.

Some gun men menacingly walked into his parents' home which the parents shared with his sisters' family. In a bid to make the parents feel compromised, the gun men came out and told them threateningly that a weapon was found in their son's room. The father, the late Dr. Kopalasingam, told the intruders firmly that the weapon was something that they had themselves lost. But for the mother it was the last straw. She had less than a year ago been successfully operated for a spinal condition and had made

some progress. The incident set in motion a rapid decline. She began to wake up in the nights and scream, telling others that she had seen her son's corpse lying at the junction. Evidently the fate of many others like Rajani was gnawing at her subconscious mind. The end, through agonising months, came partly as a merciful dispensation in the following spring. Although the cause of death was diagnosed as bone cancer, the weight of events was unmistakable. The defence mechanisms of a young widowed mother who because of her helpless babes could not think of dying, would have operated differently. Sritharan evaded capture by the LTTE, but never saw his mother again.

The LTTE, evidently angry that Sritharan had evaded capture, set its ponderous surveillance mechanism working extra hard. Since Sritharan was well known at the university, the LTTE was as yet unable to frame credible charges to discredit him. Instead, rumours were circulated that Sritharan was in possession of (illegal) weapons. Besides, his role in a taking principled stand on violations by the Sri Lankan and Indian states was well known.

Over a year went by, before the LTTE's propaganda chief Yogi came on the air in late 1991 with a tirade against the UTHR (Jaffna). From the preceding May a major crackdown had commenced in the university of Jaffna, with the arrests of several students, at least two of whom were released several months later. Among those not released were Manoharan and Chelvi, detained in August 1991. Manoharan was a vibrant Christian pacifist, active in Pax Christi, who had made known his opposition to the detention of students in May. Chelvi had dissented from the PLOTE over its human rights abuses and had been much influenced by Rajani.

On a previous occasion Yogi had made a public speech at the university chiding people for their sympathy towards the Muslims then being expelled from Jaffna. If he was being original, he would not have known that substantially the same speech would have been made by an older generation of his Sinhalese counterparts with some changes in ethnic titles.

Yogi spent 45 minutes of air time attacking the UTHR (Jaffna) and Sritharan in particular. The UTHR (Jaffna) were referred to as anti-social elements - the category threatened with elimination in the LTTE leaflet mentioned earlier. He went on to claim that Sritharan was the leader of anti-social organisations such as the NLFT and PLFT; and further accused Sritharan of having borrowed military equipment from the EPRLF and having returned them, save some communication equipment and AK 47 rifles. Further taken to task were the institutions that had awarded doctoral degrees to members of the UTHR(Jaffna)- which happen to be well established institutions in Britain.

The NLFT and PLFT were defunct Leftwing groups whose outlook was political rather than military. The NLFT had been critical of the LTTE and other groups for compromising the future of the Tamil struggle by accepting the tutelage of foreign powers, instead of strengthening the local community - a matter that came to a head with arrival of the IPKF. The LTTE

never answered their charges politically, but through terror. Even with many former members of these organisations killed, or detained years after they became defunct, the LTTE continues to see Banquo's ghost. This speech, as others, was taken by the people as it should have been.

Right along, other moves had also been made by the LTTE. Information had been received from several independent sources, to the effect that persons compromised with the LTTE had been sent to the South to locate members of the UTHR (Jaffna).

From May 1991 the University of Jaffna discontinued Sritharan and Hoole. The University had been closed shortly after the outbreak of war the previous year. In a move where several questions remained unanswered (such as arrangements for Muslim students and staff who were physically thrown out of Jaffna) the university in January 1991 dismissed staff members who had not responded to its call to report for work in November 1990. In the case of the two members mentioned a verbal undertaking was given to senior academics by the vice chancellor who visited Colombo in February 1991, to the effect that their presence in Jaffna was out of the question and that the order should not apply to them. Subsequently the University Grants Commission in Colombo was informed in writing that it could pay the salaries of the two, pending a resolution of the matter. This was in line with the understanding treatment of academics in Southern universities who felt their security threatened during the preceding JVP troubles. The subsequent dismissals of the two came as an unexplained about turn by the University of Jaffna. The official reason given was their failure to report in November 1990.

Subsequently, about July 1991 the University Teachers' Association in Jaffna issued a tautological statement saying that it was not associated in reports issued by the UTHR (Jaffna). In early 1992 a key university official visited Colombo. He admitted to a number of his senior Southern colleagues that the two dismissals were improper and gave an undertaking to have the council review them.

Soon after he left for Jaffna, a statement of the university council appeared in the press in Colombo dissociating the staff and the council of the university from the work of the UTHR (Jaffna). This could not have appeared without the explicit authorisation of the university official mentioned. The official's intimate Southern colleagues, long sympathetic to the Tamil cause, were taken aback by the appearance of the statement. During his conversations on the subject, the official had not alluded to the existence of the statement.

The university would of course if challenged, presume upon its legal autonomy in justification of its conduct. As important as is the principle, a society amidst a liberation struggle ought to treat it as much more than an arid notion. There are also questions of creative uses of the concept of academic freedom, which is the corner-stone of the principle of university autonomy, and the administrative power of individuals in the council is conceptually subservient to it. There is then

the matter of dignity of the institution which is also reflected on the community at large.

In making the about turn, the university authorities did not say that the particular threat to the security of the two individuals, which they had tacitly acknowledged, had largely disappeared and give them time to report. There are also many questions of dignity apart from technicalities and doubtful legalities: The university had nothing to say about the Muslims who as an ethnic group were forcibly barred from the university, nor did it do anything to discharge its responsibilities by them. It pretended that they did not exist. It saw no need to issue a statement regarding students detained for spurious reasons by the LTTE from May 1991.

It did nothing to distance itself from a senior staff member who threatened the students at an LTTE summoned meeting. Going beyond the LTTE's own claims, he condemned the students detained by the LTTE in May 1991 as traitors and added that more of them would be weeded out. Two of the students so branded by him were subsequently released.

Nor was it ever said by any body of the university, or any civilian body for that matter, that opinions held or aired by the students detained, or the work of the UTHR(Jaffna), were not creative uses of the principle of academic freedom in defence of the community in a liberation struggle. Nor was it said that the UTHR(Jaffna) had published falsehood.

Thus in its war against dissent the LTTE has tried assassination, intimidation, torture and incarceration; and strangest of them all, reflecting a litigious culture, quasi-legal methods. With the UTHR(Jaffna) attempts to discredit it locally have prudently not gone beyond feelers. The LTTE's international agents on the other hand maintain a public silence over the UTHR (Jaffna) and resort to private insinuation.

Some Curious features and the Character of the LTTE:

There are some features of the repression which have a bearing on the nature of the organisation and the legitimacy it lays claim to. The LTTE has looked upon all dissent, such as literary or human rights work, as military operations. A common allegation is that persons in such activity are backed by military and communication equipment as well as big money. Such obsessions seem to harbour more than a rhetorical element. In respect of the UTHR (Jaffna) such allegations were made in Yogi's speech quoted above and once more in a recent broadcast. The book 'the Broken Palmyra' was published in the US the first time in April 1990 and only a few copies were brought into Sri Lanka. The second printing was done in Colombo and issued recently. Apparently unaware that it was printed locally, the LTTE broadcast an allegation on its radio that communication equipment had been freighted into the country along with copies of the book. (Even so the UTHR(Jaffna) cannot aspire to privileges with the Sri Lankan customs which the LTTE once enjoyed). Such claims may be seen partly as a move to discourage possession of the book without actually banning it, or perhaps

to build a case against its authors. This second reference to communication equipment also reflects the obsession with the UTHR(J) as a military outfit.

This may have partly to do with the anxiety the LTTE feels about information appearing in UTHR(J) reports. But such incidents as have appeared in these reports are things known to ordinary people in Jaffna who have not suppressed their common human curiosity as a protective measure. In the case of those persons with ties that may make them objects of suspicion, such suppression becomes a necessity. To posit an operation involving sophisticated communication equipment in connection with human rights work is reflective of the LTTE's low esteem of ordinary people.

The people have been so effectively silenced by terror, that the LTTE likes to believe that they also do not understand what is going on around them. But it also retains a gnawing suspicion that it may not be so. Thus in October 1991, a time of rising public disenchantment in Jaffna, the LTTE killed about 40 unidentified prisoners at public places as a warning. A measure of how the LTTE views people has been in evidence in many rural villages, particularly in the East. Over a period LTTE cadre would be seen around the village collecting meals. One day they would set off a land mine on an army patrol or conduct a massacre in a neighbouring Muslim village and keep away during reprisals. They would then arrive to take photographic records for propaganda. When things settle down, it is business as usual with the LTTE going back to being liberators. It is taken for granted that the people do not think. Such information collection or concoction has a military angle to it - a state army vs unarmed civilians. But it is effective. Following the LTTE massacre of Muslims in Eravur (August 1990), the government in Colombo was denying reprisals by its forces and Muslim home guards in the neighbouring Tamil village of Chenkalady. But at the same time, a Chenkalady man in Germany saw TV pictures of his battered home.

In every village on the other hand one meets humble men who clearly perceive what is going on in contrast to sophisticated university doctors and members of the intelligentsia. Demands of survival prevent them from talking frankly to visitors. The truth is that they are hopelessly trapped between two callous forces. All this is lost on their would be liberators who take their stupidity for granted.

There are also unknown groups of individuals operating behind LTTE lines issuing underground leaflets giving details of human rights abuses. The LTTE would characteristically see it as a large military conspiracy. The reality is that they would be small groups of frightened individuals with military hardware not exceeding sequestered paper, a ramshackle type writer and Roneo machine.

The most important reason for the LTTE's perception is psychological. The organisation evolved in such a manner that those who fitted in best were the ones brain washed very young or whose personality had become stunted by blind loyalty to the

leader, a personification of the Dancing Shiva. To them, a human personality without the gun to threaten one's way around became inconceivable. A person deprived of the power and protection which armed might gave him was ordered to commit suicide. When the basis of one's belief was so fragile, it made no sense to train a person to keep faith under the rigours of loneliness, imprisonment and torture; or even under a change of environment that opens alternative possibilities. This has received confirmation from a number of known instances.

The LTTE thus finds it difficult to come to terms with people who do not need armed institutional protection to stand by their beliefs and ideals. It must either invent a military gang to explain them, or torture them and break them to confirm that they are not different from themselves. This has been the tragedy of many spirited and independent Tamils with much to contribute for the well being of all.

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