# SRI LANKA: WITNESS TO HISTORY

A Journalist's Memoirs 1930-2004

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S. SIVANAYAGAM

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As a country, Sri Lanka never managed to get the world's attention until 35 years after it achieved independence. Even when it did – in the wake of the State-aided pogrom against the minority Tamils in 1983 – it was an unflattering image it presented to the world. The 20-year Tamil war of independence that followed and the internal strife that had rocked the country since then show no signs of receding despite a cease-fire between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam held tenuously through the tireless efforts of Norway's peace negotiators.

In this book, veteran Sri Lankan journalist and editor S.Sivanayagam traces the roots of the ethnic problem, and records in chronological detail the troubled island's post-independence history up to contemporary times. As a witness and a victim himself of the historical process, his account takes on the form of a first person narrative as well, while foreign correspondents and Sri Lankan journalists are themselves quoted extensively in recording the events of the war years.

Apart from being the first-ever comprehensive documentation on Sri Lanka covering a period of 47 years, Sivanayagam's own insights and his memoirs lend additional unique charm to the book.

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*A Journalist's Memoirs*
*(1930 - 2004)*

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To my wife Subadra

and my daughters

Nangai & Narayani

who felt my life's pains

more than I did.

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How can I ever forget the many friends from the Tamil Forum, the International Tamil Foundation and the wider expat community in Britain whose friendship and help in the past and until now I shall continue to hold dear. This book is a token of my saying farewell as I take leave of them from this country.

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# Foreword

CLIO, the muse of history, is a demanding mistress. She has proved vulnerable to the subjective biases of many who try to reveal her "true" import. Some historians claim the "benefit of hindsight" is a great advantage. Too often it only permits the introduction of the theories in vogue at the time. Others who take the very long view of historical evolution press historical events into the framework of their choice ignoring all that inconveniently refuses to fit. The subjective hazard is one that besets all historians and is not easily dispelled. Here, however, in Mr.Sivanayagam's splendid book is a melding of history and autobiography. Even so, subjective bias cannot be avoided entirely but it is greatly minimized by being a record of "felt history" if one may call it that.

History touches peoples' lives at whatever remove. Ancient history has meaning for the Sinhala people and they run the double jeopardy of doubtful authenticity due to the long lapse of time and the great changes that time has wrought in the standards to which historical writing is held. History that is "red in tooth and claw" is that which is immediately experienced and recorded and explained by reference to the framework which the victim of history finds just and valid. In this book the accepted framework is the cause of Tamil nationalism and its evolution in the last half century.

Ethnic nationalism is the single pervading feature of 20th century history. Coming to early fruition in the break up of Norway and Sweden followed by Irish independence from the mother country (Great Britain) of the greatest empire of the time, it runs its course throughout the century. Its salience was temporarily obscured by the emergence of internationalist philosophies

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such as Marxism-Leninism and Maoism which portended a threat of world domination. But surely and steadily underneath that misleading carapace ethnic nationalism grew and strengthened and bided its time. By the final quarter of the century its time had come. In Vietnam it reached its full flower. The world has not been the same since.

Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka is but another instance of it, and, perhaps one of the most formidable. The state adversary it faces is but a weak and fumbling foe dependent on outside help and so vulnerable to international pressures of all kinds. The Sinhala nationalism that is just stirring is backward-looking and medievalist in its thinking and programmes and as such is out of sync with the modern world. Mr.Sivanayagam's experiences and this book in which they are so eloquently recorded have the great advantages of personal acquaintance of the events whereof he writes and also of alignment with one of the great transforming movements of the contemporary world. It is a combination which makes for a riveting read and one which will reward an audience even wider than that which adheres to the Tamil national cause.

One must hope that Mr.Sivanayagam will not lay down his pen and will continue to dazzle us with this brilliant exposition of the great cause to which he is committed.

**- Adrian Wijemanne**

30th December 2004

Cambridge, U.K.

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# Introduction

*"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to fulfil it"*

- George Santayana, philosopher

Some years ago, I was intrigued to see a headline in an Indian newspaper that said: "History does a vanishing act from classrooms in Lanka". The report filed with a Colombo headline said:

> "The fascinating story of Sri Lanka's past, one of the longest written histories in the world, is contained in two literary works compiled by Buddhist monks in the beginning of the sixth century B.C.
>
> "Educationists worry, however that the ancient chronicles no longer fascinate university students who are opting for Science and information technology. The arts has been edged out of classrooms apparently because it doesn't help students to find quick and lucrative employment, unlike in the past. Only 1,981 students opted for history at high school in 1990, compared to 17,507 in 1966"[1]

This writer is not aware of the proportion of high school students who offer history as a subject today, but if such was the dramatic drop of interest over a period of twenty four years in 1990, it should be safe to assume that the same trend continues even now. The interlinking of the study of history with employment prospects is however only a marginal aspect of the problem. Neither does the loss of interest in the study of ancient history matter when it does not help in solving the problems of the present. Cluttered as those

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ancient chronicles are with myths and miracles, it is even questionable whether they will pass the test of historical validity in the modern age. The question one should be addressing today is: after fifty six years of independence what knowledge of contemporary events has seeped into the collective consciousness of the people? A week is a long time in politics, said a British Prime Minister Harold Wilson once. Fifty six years is a long, long time in the history of peoples and nations. What do the country's leaders have to show for five and a half decades of self-rule? How do the Sinhalese people themselves see where that self-rule had led them? Within those 56 years, 48 of them had seen ethnic tensions, and 20 of them an internal war with disastrous consequences with no perceivable end. Have any attempts made to record the history of these momentous events? It was a former university teacher and administrator who, in a newspaper article in 1998, drew attention to the need for a study and writing of military history of Sri Lanka. He wrote:

> "....As we are about to leave behind fifty years of independence, there is still to appear not so much as a seminal work, but at least a substantial journal article, or any other scholarly presentation, on the contemporary military history of Sri Lanka. On the other hand, books and monographs have appeared on economics, politics, and social and cultural history of the post-1948 period. But military history has remained completely out of focus of scholars, professional military officers, academic associations, and the defence establishment. One solitary departure has been the occasional focus of creative writers, song writers and film makers on the human and psychological ravages and traumas of war.
>
> "The conduct of the current conflict is covered sporadically by the media, both local and foreign, but invariably under severe conditions of censorship and restrictions on freedom of movement. As a result the objective documentation of military

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> activities by scholars and journalists remains a futile exercise and an unrealistic expectation.....This contrasts sharply with the pre-eminent place accorded to military history in officer education in the western countries and even in some of the developing countries.....For example, our own ethnic conflict which at one time sucked in the Indian defence forces into its vortex, has failed to evoke any scholarly interest of Sri Lankan scholars, while a number of books and memoirs on the IPKF intervention have been written by Indian scholars, officers, journalists and diplomats.....[2]

Writing of history has of course its own pitfalls. Do the Sinhalese and the Tamil peoples, whether scholars, commentators or journalists, look at past events with the same pair of eyes ? Very seldom they do. For, if that were so, much of the conflicts that have beset the country could have been avoided. In narrating the country's history from 1956 to the present this writer has scrupulously maintained the oft-quoted dictum of the legendary editor C.P.Scott – "Comment is free, but facts are sacred". There has been no attempt to twist facts, even while exercising the freedom to comment. But at the same time he makes no apology for looking at the various strands of past history through the eyes of the Tamil people. He has been, after all, not only a witness, but like the rest of the Tamil people, a victim of that same history. If the book starts the story with the year 1956, it was not merely because that was a defining year in the country's history, a year important for the non-privileged Sinhalese people themselves, but also because that was the year that caused a deep hurt in Tamil consciouness. My account begins with a personal experience, the kind of experience no Sinhalese reader of this book could have likely gone through. Will that help in understanding the view of post-independence history as the Tamil people see it?

Let us look at the beginnings of self-rule. Ceylon, as it was known then, came to be independent through what amounted to a "horse deal" between the British colonial office and an elite Sinhalese caucus led by Don Stephen

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Senanayake, which naturally took into account only the British and Sinhalese interests. The Tamils who dominated the political life of the country for many decades until the 1920s were nowhere in the picture when it came to a transfer of power. Therein lay the seeds of the ethnic divide that was to follow. Once the numerically preponderant Sinhala majority had taken control of the levers of power, it would have been idle to expect them to share power willingly with an ethnic minority. But what was inexcusable was the fact that Sinhalese leaders fed that belief, and the Tamils took them in trust. That trust was betrayed time and again.

Urging the minorities in 1945 to accept the Soulbury constitution, D.S.Senanayake gave this solemn assurance: "On behalf of the Congress (the Ceylon National Congress), and on my own behalf I give the minority communities the sincere assurance that no harm need they fear at our hands in a free Lanka". Appealing specifically to the Tamils, he made this peroration: "Do you want to be governed from London or do you want, as Ceylonese, to help govern Ceylon?"[3]. Once he became Prime Minister of "free Lanka", D.S.Senanayake's first legislative acts were to deprive one million plantation Tamils of their voting rights and citizenship.

The country started life in 1948 with many advantages. Richly endowed by Nature, with an immense tourism potential, there was in addition the exchange-earning colonial patrimony in the form of Tea. With a healthy economy and a high literacy rate, and a people initiated into adult franchise as early as 1931, the island at the time of independence presented the picture of a peaceful, vibrant, model democracy. Today. fifty six years later, that picture has been reduced to a mocking caricature. In a country that earned its independence after 450 years of western colonial rule without a shot being fired, the one dominating factor today is THE GUN.

The late Tamil leader S.J.V.Chelvanayakam told British correspondent Walter Schwarz in 1975 – "Our fundamental mistake was not to ask for independence when the British left"[4]. If the hour did not produce a Tamil

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Jinnah, it was because Eelam Tamil nationalism as a concept was not even born. There were several reasons for it. Beginning with the last quarter of the 19th century until late into the 1920s, the Sinhalese themselves were content to be led by Tamil politicians of the calibre of Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan and Sir Muttu Coomaraswamy. Ethnicity was never a divisive factor, and Tamil leadership was luxuriating in the Colombo-centred elite politics of the time. Tamils, who as a people have a weakness for living in the past, saw too late a different kind of future that was catching up with the past. Their emotional dependence on India for cultural and religious nourishment also inhibited the birth of an independent Eelam Tamil nationalism. If the Tamils helped the Sinhalese to get their independence on a silver salver fifty six years ago, today they have to wage a bloody three decades of war to wrest theirs.That is the Tamil tragedy. That is also the Sri Lankan tragedy. Tragic as the history is, when one thinks of the land where one was born and bred, lived and hoped, and then despaired and left, what comes to mind is a comic limerick by the poet-singer Bob Dylan.

*God's plan made a hopeful beginning*
*But Man spoilt his chances by sinning*
*We trust the story*
*will end in God's glory*
*But at present the other side's winning.*

December 2004


1. Feizal Samath, Inter-Press Service, Asian Age
2. Dr.W.M.K. Wijetunga, Sunday Observer, Colombo, Sept.27 1998.
3. State Council debate on the Soulbury Constitution, Hansard, 8th November 1945.
4. The Tamils of Sri Lanka, Minority Rights Group, London; 2nd Revised Edition, September 1983, first published in September 1975.


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# Chapter 1

## 1956: A Jaffna-Colombo train journey & A taste of "Sinhala Only".

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# 1956: A Jaffna-Colombo train journey & A taste of "Sinhala Only".

In the history of Sri Lanka – or Ceylon as it was known then – the year 1956 was a watershed.It marked a turning point in the relations between the Sinhalese and Tamil peoples in the post-independence period. What happened that year was grandiloquently referred to as a "social revolution", an ushering in of the age of the common man. It was in part that, but what it effectively did was to separate the "Sinhalese sheep" from the "Tamil goats", and make both conscious of their separate identities. The author of that social revolution was an Oxford-educated pompous orator called Solomon West Ridgeway Dias (SWRD) Bandaranaike. He was the son of a Sinhala "Maha Mudaliyar" – a title he earned by paying obeisance to the colonial British governors of the day, and naming his son after two of them.

June 5 that year was an important milestone. That was the day the Official Language Bill making Sinhalese the sole official language of the country was introduced in parliament. While making Tamils virtually illiterate overnight in the transaction of public business, the bill proved to be a millstone round the neck of the country as well, dragging it into ultimate tragedy and ruination.

One does not know how to explain it, why events in the country used to impinge on my own life - a mere spectator as I was – in some way or another. That day was the beginning. I was taking train to Colombo, 250 miles away, from my home village in the north. I got into the night mail train at Kokuvil, complete with pillow and reading material, and got into a corner seat of a 3rd

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class compartment. I was a law student then, having resigned my editorial staff job in the *Ceylon Daily News* to satisfy a parental wish. Securing a corner seat was the ambition of every "Gandhi class" passenger. The minor risk of your neighbour falling asleep on your shoulder notwithstanding, a corner seat makes a big difference to the 11-hour night journey in a packed compartment. The next station was Jaffna, and hordes of people wait there ready to rush in. As the train pulled into the station I witnessed a strange sight. The platform was full of passengers and belongings, but no one, not one, was making any attempt to get in. It was like being shown a still shot in a movie when you are expecting fast action. I peeped out and asked the nearest person what had happened. He merely mumbled "some trouble in Colombo". The train showed no signs of moving nor did the passengers show any inclination to get in. The station master , the guard and the engine driver were in a huddle, while the people waited anxiously. Finally, when the train began moving after a long delay, none of the passengers got in. There I was, virtually alone in the compartment, master of all I surveyed, relishing the prospect of stretching my five foot frame on the seat, undisturbed until I reached Colombo. Any so-called "some trouble in Colombo" did not seem to me, in my youthful bravado, daunting enough to put me off my journey.

It was eight in the morning when I blinked my eyes and looked out of the window. The train which should have reached journey's end at Colombo Fort station around five odd in the early hours of the morning was yet at Ragama station several miles away. And then came a rush of passengers. They were all office workers going to Colombo. My sole occupancy of the compartment was no longer there. It was then I heard some commotion. As I looked out, my neighbour, an elderly type in shabby black coat and sarong, possibly a railway worker, motioned to me and said something in Sinhala. I realised he was trying to caution me to sit still. He was obviously warning me against some danger. That danger came soon enough.

A gang of thugs stormed into my compartment making threatening noises against all Tamils, and there I was, the only Tamil around, an obvious sitting

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target. They came for me. The ruffian in front barged in, swept my glasses off my face, and began dragging me. My determined resistance apart, the thugs faced another disadvantage. The 3rd class carriages were Rumanian imports that did not provide much leg space between passengers on opposite sides. To the thugs it meant knocking against the knees of other Sinhala passengers before pulling me out from my corner seat. Except my black-coated neighbour who was trying to reason out with my attackers not to harm me (who was immediately silenced with a blow on his face) the others merely watched, the women with sullen disapproval, but all of them fearing to come to my defence. The intention of the ruffians was very clear; they had a brilliant thought in their heads, to push me out of the moving train! Despite my desperate struggle, they managed to drag me near the open door. For a moment, Death stared me in the face. But some hand of Providence that looks after people in such situations, interceded at that point. The second thug who was helping the first who had his hands on me, stumbled and fell over the latter making him lose his grip on me. That was my rugby scramble chance. I crawled my way out and fled towards the guard's compartment in the rear; which could not have helped much except gain a little time. But the moment of reckoning had passed. There was no sign of pursuers. The train was slowing down and Maradana station loomed into view. I ran back to my compartment, some of my fellow passengers helped me with my things, some good Samaritan found my glasses for me, and seeing police officers on the platform I quickly descended. Colombo Fort was my intended station, not Maradana, but that was a negligible consideration.

The police inspector to whom I complained looked a harassed man, but he asked me to stay around anyway. I was then put into a police van surrounded by armed policemen, and the vehicle finally made its way towards Khan clock tower at Pettah. A small mob was there, and no sooner they detected my presence in the van, they got into action. A hail of stones hit the wire mesh on one side of the van, and the inspector ordered the driver to make a quick getaway. I then realised why the poor police inspector was looking harassed. Hours later, after a long wait at the Fort police station where I was

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given a welcome cup of tea, I was deposited home at Wellawatte safely. That was the morning after June 5, and I was beginning to get a taste of the mood in Colombo. Looking back at my train experience that morning, it dawned on me, at the 25th year of my life that bitter truth – I was a Tamil! What I had failed to realise for myself, those thugs taught me. It was the kind of experience that changed my outlook in life forever. It set me thinking. I tried to re-live that experience; the humiliation at the hands of fellow human beings to whom I had done no harm. That near-brush with Death. Why did they want to kill me? They did not know me, who I was. I was no one in particular as far as they were concerned. The only, and the only reason for their intended act of murder was that I happened to be born a Tamil, and identified as one.

But the enormity of the humiliation heaped on the Tamil people and the Tamil leaders on that day – June 5 – was something I was to learn later. Eight years after independence, that was the first of many subsequent mob attacks on Tamils. In attacking the Tamil leaders who sat in silent protest over the introduction of the "Sinhala Only" bill in parliament that day, the pro-government mobs made two things clear: **that Tamils cannot claim language rights, but what was worse, they did not have even the right to protest!**

The Tamil Federal Party under the leadership of that gentle Christian, Samuel James Velupillai (SJV) Chelvanayakam believed in the philosophy of non-violent action as a way of protest against injustice. Tamils had traditionally come under the influence of the Indian Gandhian movement for independence from the time of the Jaffna Youth Congress of the 1920s and 30s. The value of the concept of *Satyagraha* was, unlike in the case of the Sinhalese, ingrained in the Tamil mind. It is this that led them to organise what they believed was a peaceful *satyagraha* at the parliament end of the Galle Face Green (but disallowed) on that momentous day. It was like the silent sit-ins that were part of the anti-nuclear campaign in England headed by British philosopher Bertrand Russell. When about 300 Federal Party volunteers led

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by Mr.Chelvanayakam and other M.P.s gathered for the protest, a violent mob gathered round and set upon them mercilessly. Mr.V.Navaratnam, an important functionary of the party and then M.P. for Kayts, recounting the incidents of the day wrote in his book – THE FALL AND RISE OF THE TAMIL NATION (1995) - excerpts:

> The moment the volunteers and leaders reassembled at the (Galle Face) hotel end, a waiting mob of more than a thousand Sinhalese toughs fell on them like a pack of wolves in a most inhuman and cowardly attack. They (the satyagrahis) were thrashed and felled prostrate on the ground. Their placards were seized and the wooden poles used as clubs. Some were trampled upon, kicked, beaten and spat upon.
>
> Not a single satyagrahi raised his hand in retaliation, except Dr. Naganathan. Five ruffians singled him out and chased him to the end of the promenade. He turned and met them alone with his fists and legs.....satyagraha or not. Naganathan by nature was one who would never brook an insult to his manhood.
>
> The police arrived on the scene and sent mobs off the Green to the Galle Face Centre Road. The beleagured and exhausted satyagrahis regrouped and marched towards Parliament House under a hail of stones, hoots, and filthy abuse. To add to their misery, the clouds burst and a heavy downpour of rain soaked them to their bones.
>
> As the day advanced, and the Colombo harbour workers were let out, the mobs swelled until about mid-day and an estimated 10,000 crowded the entire length of the Galle Face Centre Road and around Parliament building. Tamils spotted on the road were beaten up and thrashed. Chelvanayakam's two sons, Manoharan and Vaseeharan were caught and roughly tossed in the air repeatedly. Many prominent Tamil professionals and others were caught, stripped and thrashed. The violence spread

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throughout the city of Colombo, to the roads, public transport, shops, business houses; wherever Tamils were seen, they were attacked.

The police stopped the satyagrahis at the northern end of the Galle Face Green and blocked their way to the precincts of Parliament House. The volunteers sat down peacefully where they were stopped, and remained there for the rest of the day. **A prominent Sinhalese lawyer of Colombo, Mr.Paranavitane of the law firm of De Silva and Mendis, and a Roman Catholic priest, Father Xavier Thani Nayagam, the famous Tamil Scholar, emerged out of the crowds and sat down with the satyagrahis. The gesture did not pass unnoticed by the Press.**

Shortly before Parliament sitting was due to commence at 2 p.m., the Prime Minister appeared on the steps of Parliament House and addressed the crowds. He looked up at the skies and remarked that the rains were going to come down again and the demonstrators would cool off. He asked the people to go home peacefully.

Mr.Amirthalingam, M.P. for Vaddukoddai was struck on the head by one of the stones thrown by the mob. At 2 p.m. Mr.C.Suntharalingam, M.P. for Vavuniya took him with his bleeding head and entered the chamber of the House of Representatives where the Official Language Bill was being introduced. They were greeted with derisive laughter and cries of 'wounds of War'

The satyagraha was called off at 5 o'clock in the evening. About 18 injured volunteers and Mr.V.N.Navaratnam, M.P. for Chavakachcheri were warded at Dr.Rutnam's Private Hospital at Union Place, Slave Island.

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Elsewhere, in the Eastern Province, in the Gal Oya valley where the first planned Sinhala colonisation took place, there were ten days of sporadic rioting in which an estimated 150 people died. (B.H.Farmer, *A Divided Nation, London Institute of Race Relations, Oxford University Press, 1963).* In Batticaloa, also in the East, a hotel was burned down and two Tamils were shot dead.

On June 15, 1956, the "Sinhala Only" Bill was passed by 66 votes to 29. The Left M.P.s from the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party, all Sinhalese with the sole exception of Mr.P.Kandiah, (CP), M.P. for Point Pedro, voted against the Bill, along with Tamil M.P.s of other parties. But even these parties of the traditional Left were to capitulate in later years in the face of an assertive Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism.

Two divergent views expressed during the language debate by two notable Left politicians of that time are worth recalling. Dr.S.A.Wickremasinghe, leader of the Communist Party pointed out that parity of status was accorded to all languages in China, and also in the Soviet Union, where there were sixteen official languages. He appealed to the Government to encourage the minorities by giving them the right to use their own language. In reply to that argument, Mr. Philip Gunawardene, Minister of Agriculture and Food, observed that in Wisconsin in the U.S.A. 80 percent of the inhabitants were of German origin and spoke German in their homes, while in New York there were more Jews than in Israel, yet there was no demand in the U.S.A. for official status for the German or Hebrew languages. (*Keesings's Contemporary Archives, July 28 – August 4, 1956, p.15012).* There was no comparison in both situations as cited by Mr.Gunawardene, but then he was a freakish kind of politician. Once acclaimed in his home country as the "Father of Marxism", he went to Wisconsin University in the U.S. to do a degree in Agricultural Science. On his return he had not only outgrown his Marxism, but also developed a taste for Sinhala chauvinism.

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As far as the Tamils were concerned, it was not simply a question of language rights, or the fear of a loss of job opportunities. Their identity as Ceylonese was being questioned. In beginning to lose their sense of belonging to the country in which they were born and bred for centuries, a feeling of alienation had to set in. As for me, used to English as the spoken common language – a middle class advantage no doubt - and having studied and worked with Sinhalese without any feeling of separateness it was hard reconciling oneself to a new unpleasant reality. One way of escapism was to clutch at old memories.

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# Chapter 2

## 1930: Jaffna, Bernard Shaw and the days of the Empire



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# 1930: Jaffna, Bernard Shaw and the days of the Empire

I was born under British colonial rule. Does that make me sound like a dinosaur? The year was 1930. It was the very year that a distinguished Tamil elder statesman, Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan died; not that one means to attach any special significance to the coincidence, except that it reminded me of a story about the American humorist writer Mark Twain. It appears that on the day he landed in London he saw a newspaper billboard that read – MARK TWAIN IN LONDON: BIG BANK ROBBERY. He is reported to have made the wry comment that it showed him in bad light!

My first distinct childhood memory was when I was six years old. Living in our village, Kokuvil, in Jaffna, with my mother and sister (elder to me by seven years), we used to move to Colombo during school holidays to join my father who held a government job there. As I was to learn later, 1936 was the year which caused a shake-up in the British monarchy. King Edward VIII made history by abdicating his throne, because he could not give up the woman he loved. Unfortunately, she happened to be a twice-divorced American, Wallis Simpson. Seeing her photograph in the newspapers many years later I used to wonder what the heir to an impassive British monarchical tradition saw in her that made him lose his kingly poise. Later years were to show however that marital mishaps among British royalty were not altogether uncommon; even partiality for elderly divorcees did persist. Following that abdication, his brother, the Duke of York was crowned King George VI.

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There were fireworks at Galle Face Green in Colombo to mark the coronation of the new king, and it was to watch those fireworks that my father, mother, sister and I set out in two rickshaws from our house in Manning Town. My father and sister were in the first rickshaw, my mother and I followed in the one behind. I have a faint recollection, later confirmed by my sister, of howling and demanding that our rickshaw should go in front, and the matter was promptly put right. Like Mark Twain, one has to concede now on hindsight that the incident showed me in bad light, but then I was the only boy in my parental lineage – a late arrival as well – that probably made me a spoilt brat at that time. During my adult years of course, life's hard knocks taught me that I cannot always have things my own way.

Another childhood memory was about an elderly grey- moustached gentleman whom my sister and I used to call "Colombo Padda". Obviously he had some strong connections with Colombo, despite which he used to call at our home in Kokuvil many a time. He used to wear a kind of long tunic coat from a pocket of which dangled a silver chain at the end of which was a little round pocket watch. That contraption used to fascinate me every time he pulled it out and consulted the time. But I also had a grievance against him. On each of his visits he would bring a large slab of Nestles chocolate, which my sister dutifully shared with me, except that she appropriated for herself the colour pictures of film stars that came with the silver wrappings. That was unfair in my opinion, but it is always difficult to deal with some one seven years your senior. I used to turn my disappointment at "Colombo Padda". Why can't he bring two slabs instead of one? Much later, as a grown-up I forgave him for that lapse on discovering that he was not only my grandmother's own brother, but was also Mudaliyar C.Rasanayagam, the author of that research classic, ANCIENT JAFFNA.

ANCIENT JAFFNA was published in the year 1926. Even about twenty years later, there was a trunkful of copies of that book at our home. As to what happened to them I cannot quite remember, but somewhere in the sixties I saw a tattered copy of the book with a pavement seller in Colombo

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and was shocked when he quoted a hefty price for it which I could not afford at that time. The book, having gone out of print, had become a rare one and the bookseller obviously knew its value. The thought went into my head that if only I had taken care of that trunkful, I could have made a small fortune on that. It was left to an enterprising New Delhi book publisher – Asian Educational Services – to reprint the book in 1984, the copyright period of fifty years having lapsed.

Kokuvil was a happily placed village. Because of its proximity to the Jaffna town, the residents had the best of both worlds: a bit of the urban and quite some of the rural. While the meandering labyrinth of lanes and by-lanes (and little side lanes that ended up in a few houses) along with the village temple gave them that intimate rural community life, the Jaffna town with its hustle and bustle and noise was not far away either; a mere pedalling distance by bicycle or a quick journey by bus.

At the age of nine one is not expected to know anything about the deleterious effects of western colonialism that originate from five thousand miles away, except that by eating Huntley & Palmers biscuits and British marmalade made colonialism seem desirable. But there was one thing I was sure about at that time: I was strongly on the side of Britain and the Allies during World War II which broke out in Europe in September 1939. How it came about was not surprising. We used to subscribe to the *Ceylon Daily News*, the only morning newspaper of that time, delivered daily at home, and oh, what a lot of war pictures did it carry! It goes without saying that the news and pictures were naturally tilted in favour of the Allies, even when Hitler was overrunning one country after another. More than Churchill with his cigar it was Field Marshal Montgomery who in later years made a greater visual appeal on me. My habit of cutting and pasting and making scrap books which has endured these seventy odd years had its beginnings at the ages of ten and twelve. How old habits die hard!

What was once a distant world war confined to Europe took on a sudden

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new dimension with the entry of Japan on the side of Hitler and Mussolini in September 1940. Would one believe it that little Kokuvil tucked away in peninsular Jaffna was itself beginning to get its own fall-out from the war? The Japanese walking through Thailand, Burma, Malaya and Singapore triggered a minor influx of Malayan Tamil families into Jaffna, and correspondingly many new faces in the classrooms of Jaffna schools. They introduced two new things: the first was the suffix "la" into spoken language, "come-la", "go-la" and so on. The second was a positive contribution – the game of badminton. In my own school at Kokuvil Hindu College, I happened to be the only non-Malayan in the badminton team, and in our very first encounter with Skanda Varodaya College, Chunnakam, we were given a thorough drubbing in their indoor court by a more experienced all-Malayan quartet.

Easter Sunday April 5, 1942, was the day that the war became uncomfortably close. Japanese planes swooped over Colombo and Trincomalee and bombed both places. There was panic in the capital. Tamil parents pulled out their children from Colombo schools and admitted them into Jaffna schools. Kokuvil Hindu being a co-educational school became the beneficiary of some girl students as well. It being the practice of nicknaming fellow students, one very dark, but pretty girl was promptly nicknamed *Karuthakolumban,* literally meaning the black one from Colombo, but actually the name of Jaffna's most popular mango. War excitement was reaching Jaffna as well. Mock air raid safety drills were taught to all of us students, but of course nothing came out of all the excitement, the Japanese losing interest in Ceylon thereafter. **The bitter irony was that Jaffna which escaped bombing by a foreign enemy in 1942 was to taste deaths and destruction within forty odd years – not from an external enemy – but from the bomber planes of an "internal enemy" next door!**

Today, in the new millennium, it is hard to imagine the Kokuvil of the 1940s. There was a buxom Malayalee "Lady Teacher", Mrs.Bhargaviamma, a widow with two children, having come from the Travancore state in South India (now Kerala) living in a rented house and teaching at Kokuvil Hindu.

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As my class teacher in Forms I and II, she was the one who encouraged my taste for reading. The class cupboard was stocked with A.L.Bright Story Readers, abridged for easy reading of English authors such as Charles Dickens, R.L.Stevenson...Those were the pre-independence days when travel between India and Jaffna did not demand passports and visas and such annoying things like customs clearances! In fact, there was quite a large Malayalee presence in the island by the 1930s estimated at around 30,000 and Jaffna too had its share. My father and "Sittappa" jointly owned a Baby Austin car and our driver was Ramu, a Malayalee. There were even Brahmin music teachers - a Doresamy Iyengar who taught Veena, and a Murthy Iyer who taught the Flute, both from South India. There was a Sinhalese baker who used to come down our lane carrying a cone-topped breadbasket perched on his head. His arrival every evening was a welcome sight for me. There was also a Chinese who used to hawk his "China silk" wares down our lane. What a diverse tapestry of human beings did our little village hold! The idea of a Buddhist bhikkhu living in Kokuvil today is unthinkable; yet there was that yellow-robed affable Buddhist monk living in a rented house down Station Road and teaching Sinhala in the higher forms. We little fellows, fascinated by what was to us a strange attire, the funny way he spoke Tamil and his friendly ways, used to tickle him under his armpits, and happily enjoy his reactions.

It was many, many years later that I came to discover the identity of that monk with whom we took such liberties. He was the Ven. H.Dhammaratna Thero, a renowned scholar who was to found the Saraswathie Pirivena in Nawalapitiya; a man who translated Tamil classics such as Silappadikaram and Manimehalai into Sinhala and Sinhala works into Tamil. I was told that during the time he spent in Kokuvil, he had passed the Bala Pandit exam in Tamil and subsequently the Madurai Pandit exam as well. As a delegate to the First International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in April 1966 – largely on the initiative of Father Xavier Thani Nayagam – Dhammaratna Thero read a paper on **"The Influence of the Tamil Language on Sinhala Letters".** What an ambassador of goodwill

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would he have made between the Sinhalese and Tamil peoples, but alas, Sinhala politicians and the political brand of Buddhist monks had made that impossible. Today, when people use that ponderous word "global village", it sounds so glib and unconvincing. Was not Kokuvil which could absorb at the same time Malayalees, Madrasi Brahmin music teachers, Sinhalese bakers and Chinese vendors along with a Buddhist monk-scholar in its own way a microcosm of a "global village"?

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Jaffna of course had always been the home of human excellence. Where Nature proved niggardly and gave nothing but an arid soil, the Jaffna man compensated for it through his own talent, industry and perseverance. Where successive Sinhalese governments denied Jaffna an industrial base, the Jaffna man made Education his industry and prospered in the various professions, to the great envy of the government-pampered Sinhalese. The island of Ceylon, let alone the peninsula, was not always large enough to contain the potentiality of the Jaffna man, at which times he began venturing out into the big, wide world: sailors from Valvettiturai daring into international waters, scholars and film-makers to India, employment seekers to Malaya and Burma, and self-fulfilment seekers to the West. The arid soil of Jaffna did produce not only onions and chillies and tobacco, delicious mangoes and bananas and grapes, but it also raised great men – Sir Muttu Coomaraswamy the first Asian knight, the first non-Christian to be admitted to the Inns of Court in London ,and the friend of Victorian Prime Ministers Disraeli and Palmerston and Gladstone; his son, Dr.Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, the savant of international repute; the Ponnambalam brothers Ramanathan and Arunachalam, whose services to the public life of the country were unmatched in the country's history; the Saravanamuttu brothers....

The late K.Kanagaratnam, one-time Auditor General and later M.P. for Vaddukoddai once related to me proudly an incident relating to Sir Muttu. It

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appears he was riding a horse carriage in London in the company of Disraeli when the latter pointed a cane at a figure walking on the pavement, and said: Sir Muttu, there goes your governor. Disraeli wrote an unfinished novel in which there was a character called Kusinara reputedly based on Sir Muttu. The novel was published after Disraeli's death in *The Times*, London. But despite his close association with British high society, Sir Muttu remained a proud Oriental. On his death in 1879, Ferguson of the *Ceylon Observer* wrote that he was "the foremost man of the twenty millions or more of the Dravidian race". (The Life of Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan, Vol. 1 M.Vythilingam, Ramanathan Commemmoration Society, Colombo, 1971).

It was another Jaffna man, - from Atchuvely – who staged a one-man "invasion" into the literary circles in London during the years of the Second World War. That was Poet Tambimuttu who kept alive and fostered English poetry in the forties through his publication *Poetry London*. How he landed in London in 1938 from distant Atchuvely and how he earned the friendship and applause of leading English poets T.S.Eliot and Dylan Thomas and charmed his way into a select artistic milieu was a fairy tale by itself. Tambimuttu was another shining example of how Tamils, as a people, have had sufficient reserve of character and talent to overcome any imposed disabilities, including colonial status.

Jaffna herself attracted men and women of brilliance. The first Lady Superintendent of Ramanathan College in Chunnakam was a famous actress of the London stage – Florence Farr (Mrs.Emery), a friend of Irish playwright Bernard Shaw and Irish poet W.B.Yeats. Bernard Shaw wrote a short play named *On the Rocks,* the chief dominating character of which he named **Sir Jafna Pandranath !** (Yes, Jaffna with one f). In 1982, when I was editing the *Saturday Review* in Jaffna, I wrote about this little-known play of Shaw's and posed the question about the possible identity of that Shavian character. Two readers responded with more information, James T.Rutnam and C.Sinnathamby. James T.Rutnam wrote to say:-

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> With reference to your query whom Shaw had in mind when he created the character of Sir Jafna Pandranath, there is no doubt that the character represented (or misrepresented) is Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan. .Ramanathan had met Florence Farr in or about 1902 at a meeting of Theosophists which he addressed. This meeting led finally to Florence, the soul-searching intellectual and haunting siren of society in London packing her bags and coming over to Jaffna to sit at the feet of Ramanathan....Florence Farr died at the General Hospital, Colombo on the 29th April 1917, at the age of 56 years. She was under the treatment of Dr.Miss Curr in Jaffna and S.C.Paul and Lucian de Zilwa in Colombo.

C.Sinnathamby, writing from Tellippalai West sent me a more exhaustive account, which I feel is worth reproducing in full. He writes:-

> George Bernard Shaw, in spite of the fact that he was not a sexual athlete, had in addition to Charlotte, his legal wife, a number of supplementary wives who were other men's legal wives! He captured the hearts of many women, neck and crop, and some of them openly surrendered to the charm of this woman killer.
>
> One of them was Florence Farr, a lady of angelic grace who gave up her husband and took to the stage. Sir.P.Ramanathan was on the look-out for a suitable Lady Principal to be at the helm of Ramanathan College which he founded in 1913. In those far-off days England stood panoplied in colonial splendour and the appointment of Whites as administrators was considered a great advertisement to any institution. Sir.P. scoured London and struck upon this lady and persuaded her to accept the principalship. The personal charm and intellectual attainments of Sir.P. might have attracted the attention of Shaw and he must have remembered the great Ceylonese when he wrote his play *"On the Rocks.*

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Florence Farr had acted in Shaw's "Arms and the Man" and W.B.Yeats' "Land of Heart's Desire" and this is what Shaw wrote of her. "She was a young independent woman who enjoyed social intercourse in artistic circles in London. As she was clever, good-natured and very good-looking, all her men friends fell in love with her. This had occurred so often that she had lost all patience with the hesitating preliminaries of her less practised adorers. Accordingly, when they clearly longed to kiss her and she did not dislike them sufficiently to make their gratification too great a strain on her excessive good nature, she would seize the stammering suitor firmly by the wrists, bring him into her arms by a smart pull and saying "Let's get it over" and allow the startled gentleman to have his kiss and then proceed to converse with him at her ease on subjects of more general interest.

W.B.Yeats observed that she listened to a "sage" from the East on the flight of the soul and followed him. Presumably, this sage is Sir.P.

In the early thirties of this century Shaw went round the world and his itinerary included India and Ceylon. In Bombay he met Krishnamurti (the Indian philosopher) whom he described as the most beautiful human being he ever saw. Readers will remember his recent visit to Ceylon where he was confronted by a famous lawyer of Jaffna named H.A.P.Sandrasagara who was a literary cormorant and was quite conversant with Shaw's writings. H.A.P. attacked Shaw for maintaining an intellectual aloofness and called him an evil genius. The playwright after his return to England wrote the play under reference and as such it is possible to infer that his creation of Sir Jafna Pandranath must have been modelled on Sir.P.Ramanathan and H.A.P.Sandrasagara.

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> To satisfy the curiosity of the reader I give the subsequent history of Florence Farr. She followed the Hindu way of life and within a short period of her appointment contracted cancer. Dr.Lucian de Zilwa, the well-known surgeon who treated her was able to make her out. When he told her that he had seen her on the London stage she was nonplussed and requested him not to reveal her identity. She passed away in 1917 among alien people in an alien land. Her body was cremated in Colombo according to Hindu rites.

There was no doubt that Florence Farr's decision to accept Ramanathan's invitation to walk into an unknown world was because she found in him a symbol of Oriental philosophy and mysticism, a passion which she shared with poet Yeats. In letters she wrote to Shaw and Yeats from Ramanathan College (edited and published by Clifford Bax) she used to say how she was learning Sanskrit and was also learning to play the Veena. Ramanathan of course had an amazing influence on many westerners he met with, both in England and in America. Reading the introductory note to the Bhagavad Gita in the Penguin Classics series, I was intrigued by a little known fact about the man who translated the Gita from Sanskrit to English. He was Juan Mascaro, born in Majorca and "**lectured in Oxford on the Spanish mystics, and then went to Ceylon, where he was Vice-Principal of Parameshwara College at Jaffna, and to the University of Barcelona, where he was Professor of English.** After the Spanish Civil War he settled permanently in England.... he translated a selection of the Upanishads (a Penguin Classic) and began the translation of the Bhagavad Gita. He then returned to Cambridge University where he has been a supervisor in English....."

Amazing! Imagine Majorca and Oxford and Cambridge rubbing shoulders with a Jaffna secondary school in the person of a scholar of such repute! By a strange irony, Parameshwara College for boys founded by Ramanathan which never took off as a secondary school is today the home of the Jaffna University.

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# Chapter 3

## Jaffna College: Getting educated outside the classroom!

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# Jaffna College: Getting educated outside the classroom!

There was some English author – was it Osbert Sitwell? – who, when asked to give his biographical details for inclusion in Who's Who claimed he was educated *"during school holidays from Eton"*! Eton of course is the prestigious British public school that is reputed to pave the way for the blossoming of future leaders of the community. I used to share that author's cynicism about school studies, given my own non-conformist attitude towards textbooks and examinations. It was not that school life was not enjoyable, but all that enjoyment came from outside the classrooms. Early on, I began to develop an antipathy towards anything that would have helped me pass examinations. My main enemy was the prescribed textbook, which I believed was an instrument that made a student's mind regimented towards an appointed way of thinking. On the other hand, books, books, and more books, mostly fiction, were my enduring friends.

My reading habit at Kokuvil in the early 1940s began by relishing the glossy editions of Hans Anderson's Fairy Tales and Grimm's Fairy Tales around the ages of ten and eleven. Not only did the beautiful colour illustrations provide a feast for the eye, but the books themselves smelt nice! Funny, but that was how it was. From then, it was a gradual progress to Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare and abridged editions of popular English classics. By the time I reached the Senior School Certificate (SSC) class I had my own little collection of books – six or seven H.G.Wells novels in those red and white Penguins of that time, Love and Mr.Lewisham, The War of the Worlds, Tono Bungay and so on, costing 80 cents each, and bought one at a time from a

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corner bookseller in Jaffna town called Sanmuganathan Book Depot. Book buying – apart from having to bully my mother for the money – was not considered accepted behaviour for a schoolboy. According to Jaffna parental values, reading fiction ("story books" as they called it) was a complete waste of time. The oft-quoted Francis Bacon might have said: "Reading maketh a full man....and writing an exact man" but that would be considered absolute crap by any Jaffna parent. Jaffna produces many achievers in their own limited fields – doctors, engineers, accountants....but the one-track emphasis on professional success and pursuit of money prevents most of them from becoming well-rounded personalities. They end up as ignoramuses outside their own fields and retirement leaves them bored. Those who provided vitality to Jaffna society were really the humble schoolteachers.

At Kokuvil I had the good fortune to gain the affection of two Principals, V.Nagalingam and S.Handy Perinbanayagam. Both were lovers of reading and they recognised in me a kindred spirit. The former was known as "Shakespeare Nagalingam" after that great bard of Stratford on Avon, whom he presumably read inside out. The latter was someone who changed the course of my life. V.N. was a dark, big-built, swarthy man with a kindly disposition, but who was heavily dependent on the use of snuff. His wife apparently had dozens of starched white handkerchiefs which would turn totally brown by the time he gets home. He had a habit of opening his mouth wide while stuffing the snuff into his nostrils, a habit that I thought was unnecessary, but I never liked him the less for it. Part of my pleasant extra-curricular activity during school hours was to set off to the Jaffna bazaar on my brand new Raleigh bicycle - the prize of my passing the SSC exam – to buy Principal Nagalingam's special brand of snuff, and to scour Thambithurai news stall for any new import of Indian magazines. At that time there was an Indian author called D.F.Karaka who was becoming very popular, and I used to devour his writings. Having seen his latest title "I've shed my Tears" advertised in the *Ceylon Daily News*, I ordered the book from Caves bookshop in Colombo. So very proud of my new possession, I did not even wait to read it, but took it to class and showed it to Mr.V.N. He beamed at it,

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grabbed it from me playfully and said: "Aday, I read it before you do". He had the capacity to turn child-like with his own student, such was his genial nature.

Mr.Handy Perinbanayagam who succeeded him as Principal was already a celebrity in his own right. He was the moving spirit behind the Jaffna Youth Congress, an idealistic band of young men who began agitating for the country's freedom as early as the 1920s and 30s. A distinguished product of Jaffna College, Vaddukoddai, he became inspired by the Indian freedom movement under Mahatma Gandhi and shocked the church gathering at his wedding by wearing khaddar "national" as bridegroom. It was he who was mainly responsible for inviting to Jaffna the Mahatma himself (1927), Jawaharlal Nehru (1931) and many other Indian leaders. As a teacher in his later years at Jaffna College, he became well-known as an educationist of all-island stature. In accepting the post of Principal of a school which had just then been elevated conditionally to Grade I status, he was really paying Kokuvil a compliment. I was among a handful of student pioneers in the University Entrance form, helping the school to live up precariously to its newly-won status.

From the point of view of preparing for the 2-year University Entrance course, 1949 was for me a wasted year, with the school not quite equipped for the task. That was compensated by the fact that the six of us, four boys in the Arts class and two girls in the Science earning a certain air of freedom during school hours, sometimes asked to keep the peace in the lower forms in the absence of a teacher, and getting conscious of a new (false) status! It was Principal Handy Perinbanayagam who rescued me from this mental rut and packed me off to Jaffna College, even at the cost of losing a pupil who he probably thought deserved something better. At Jaffna College, I became a hosteller for the first time in my life, and awakened into a new world of student life that I never knew even existed, used as I was to my cloistered life in Kokuvil. When much later I read a line from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil" I knew what it meant.

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I thought immediately of Handy Master. I knew then from where his hidden springs of educational philosophy issued forth. Any Principal could be relied upon to look after the interests of his school. It called for the range of values of a Handy Perinbanayagam to give thought to the future of his pupil. In sending me to Jaffna College, he imperceptibly changed the course of my own life. He gave me a sense of direction, a thing that I needed badly then, buffeted as I was by some domestic unhappiness.

Jaffna College, among other institutions, was a pioneering venture of American missionaries during British rule; one of them, grandmother of a one-time American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, was even buried at Vaddukoddai. These missionaries set up in 1822 what was known as the Batticota Seminary - the first institution of higher learning in the country. Records state that the Seminary sited at Vaddukoddai imparted instruction in Tamil, English, Sanskrit, Greek, Hebrew, Astronomy and the Sciences. The lineal successor to the Seminary was Jaffna College, founded in 1872. What struck me on entering the school was the air of freedom that seemed to pervade the campus. Unlike at Kokuvil Hindu, which was a day school anyway, life at Jaffna College had many charms, not all of which were due to the Women's hostel which was within easy reach! The campus was tucked away on the long, winding road to Karainagar, surrounded on one side by large open spaces. We had two playing fields, a library that was reputed to be one of the best, if not the best, among school libraries, quite a bit of extra-curricular activity, a joint hostellers' kick-up dinner and sing song and fun at the end of every term, and considering the conservatism of Jaffna society a fair intermingling of sexes you would not find elsewhere in the peninsula. There was one extra-curricular activity though, that was not officially recognised by the school authorities, and that was the secret meeting of "love birds" in the secluded library corners during quiet weekends!

My writing career could be said to have begun at school itself. A hostel mate from Batticaloa who later became a Vet. asked me one day: "Why don't you write something for *The Young Idea?* That was the student magazine

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published every term, edited by a student and run by the students themselves with funds provided by the school. I was new to hostel life, not yet free from the inhibitions of Kokuvil life. I said I will write, but under a pen name. That was something new. After all, every contributor, quite understandably, would want his name in. But I was wondering how my article on George Bernard Shaw, not the playwright but Shaw the lover, would be received. Only later I was to realise that the choice of the subject, and more so the writer hiding his identity behind the curious pen name "Sivvy Cousins", had evoked unusual interest. Our English tutor for the University Entrance class, handsome, romantically inclined K.C.T. took to me instantly and insisted on calling me by my pen name thereafter, the first part of which got stuck to me ever since. Encouraged by the reception to my first article, I became more daring and wrote the second one, somewhat provocatively, on the subject of GIRLS, which no doubt made the Women's hostel itching to know who this cocky character was. I believe Editor "Vayal" Kathiresan managed to hide my identity for a while, but not for long. The very next year – 1951 – I was appointed Editor.

1951 was an events-packed year for me – outside the classroom of course. Apart from discovering my future wife there, I was elected Secretary of the Academy (the H.S.C. Union) for the second (Dinner) term. The annual Academy dinner was a much-awaited event; a formal sit-down affair, place setting at table, toasting, and invariably some important personage from Colombo being invited as chief guest. I was conscious of one fact, more than status or rank, the chief guest should also be a person who could enliven the proceedings. After-dinner speaking was an art by itself, and I had heard of a few names in Colombo who were known for their wit. The Registrar of the Colombo University, A.M.K.Kumarasamy, was one of them. Having decided on him, I approached Principal "Bossy" Chelliah for permission to invite him, which he readily gave.

Departing from tradition in sending a formal typed invitation, I bought a blue-sheeted writing pad and got to work with my pen. By the time I had

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briefed Mr.Kumarasamy of all the doings at Jaffna College, explaining how the Academy functioned, bragging a little about the freedom that we students enjoyed and so on, I found I had covered seven sheets of paper. That did not bother me. The letter of acceptance from him came surprisingly fast. A few days later the Principal sent for me. Bishop Lakdasa de Mel of Kurunegala, a member of the governing board of Jaffna College was due in Jaffna around the same time. "Why not write to him and invite him too", he said. Marvellous, I thought, but there was a question of protocol that was worrying me. I said, "I had already invited Mr.Kumarasamy in the capacity of Chief Guest". Principal Chelliah waved my worry away. "The Bishop", he said, "was not the kind of person to stick to form, but write to him, explain the circumstances". Equally promptly came the Bishop's telephonic acceptance to the Principal. So I had two of the best.

Seating arrangements at tables could be somewhat tricky. As Secretary I had complete discretion in the matter. One day, "S.H.", a first year colleague, one of the few Sinhalese in the H.S.C. forms came up to me. "Machang", he said, in a conspiratorial manner, "do me a favour". "Done", I said. I liked him. He had the kind of "butter won't melt in my mouth" face, but behind that he was a bundle of mischief. There was this incident at one of those Ethics classes. Held two days in a week, during the first period after lunch, both the lunch and old Mr."S" who used to drone with his notes used to make everyone sleepy. On one of those soporific afternoons, a girl with well-endowed features seated in the very first row was cheekily resting her face on her arms and gone to sleep. It was one of those lecture halls with ascending seats. "S.H." seated at the very top, armed with a water pistol, hit her on her well-filled blouse , straight on target over the heads of all of us; no mean achievement. So, when he asked me for a favour, I gave him all my attention. "Machang", he repeated, "will you please place me next to "S.P" at the dinner table?". That was easy. I gave him the solemn promise that I would. Two days later, I was heading for the tuck shop, when "S.P" came up to me with a stern expression. "I must tell you something", she said, "if you place that chap "S.H" next to me at the dinner table, I shall walk out of

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the hall". No point in wondering how she knew, women have that kind of intuition. Now that really put me on a spot. I can't have her staging a walk-out and everyone wondering what had happened. On the other hand I did not have the heart to tell "S.H." that it was time to mend his broken heart. I did a compromise. I placed "S.H" on an opposite table in such a position that he could do a long-distance ogling at her as much as he liked. "S.P" could do nothing about it.

When the crockery and cutlery were put away, came the speeches. Chief guest A.M.K.K. rose up. "Your secretary has sent me a 7-page letter of invitation", he said, and pulled out from his pocket those blue sheets of paper which I had assumed were meant for his eyes only.. He began picking up some choice excerpts from the letter , while having a "go" at me as well, much to the delight of the entire hall. "What I like about your secretary's letter", he said "is the personal touch". That was the cue that Bishop Lakdasa was waiting for. When it came to his responding to the toast to the guests, he pounced on A.M.K.'s reference to the secretary's letter. "Ladies and Gentlemen", he said, "your Chief Guest spoke about the personal touch. That reminds me of a story. There was a dairy farm in Australia where they had newly introduced a mechanical gadget to milk the cows. The day after it happened, two cows –Bessy and Betty – were heard discussing the new gadget. "What do you think of it?", Bessy asked Betty. "Well, it is terribly efficient of course", said Betty, "but somehow I miss that personal touch!". One should have seen the genial Bishop bringing his fingers together in slow motion to illustrate the point. He left the entire hall rocking with laughter. Bishop Lakdasa was later to gain elevation as Metropolitan of Calcutta,

Jaffna College had long been a fertile ground for liberal values and nationalist impulses; a tradition that was encouraged by the American missionaries, one of whom was the distinguished Rev.John Bicknell. He was Principal during the 1920s. Students were allowed to think freely and act with a certain amount of independence, without interference from the school authorities. But as they say, tyrannies crush liberals, and democracies breed

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them!. Handy Perinbanayagam, for example, was one of the finest products of Jaffna College, but he was also that institution's most distinguished rebel. Talking to me in later years, I remember a remark he made about the British weekly, *The New Statesman,* then edited by Kingsley Martin. "Read it", he told me, "it fears neither God nor Man". Here was one, who was born into Christianity, nurtured in one of the finest Christian centres of learning, who became a rebel against doctrinal orthodoxy, and a freethinker; eventually to end up as the most remembered head of a Hindu institution.

My own occasional rebellious spirit as a student may be partly attributed to that very freedom of thought prevalent at Jaffna College. Along with it was also an inbuilt craving to get away from the beaten track, to state the unusual, to try the unorthodox, challenge smug assumptions.....not a very desirable policy if one wants to get on in life without conflicts. There was for instance this "withdrawal test" for students wanting to sit the University Entrance exam. One of the questions in the European History paper was – "Why was Robert Peel considered a great statesman?". My habit of reading only authors whom I found interesting (not necessarily those prescribed for study) and with the wide choice of books at the school's excellent library, made me convinced that the said Robert Peel was no great shakes as a statesman. To me, it seemed that various fortuitous circumstances had given him that image, which made my European history teacher too fall for it!. So I set about writing a thesis with all the facts and prejudices at my command, trying to prove the contrary. It was a well-documented answer over which I spent more than double the time and space which I should have reasonably allotted to each question. I must say, to the credit of the late "S.V.B" that he was an excellent European History teacher, although a stern one. When he walked into the lecture room a few days later with the bundle of answer papers, I thought I saw his habitual stern demeanour taking on another dimension – a hard glint in his eye despite his thick glasses. He did not waste time. He came straight to the point. "Ladies and Gentlemen", he said with a tinge of irony, "I have with me an answer paper written by a gentleman whom I do not wish to name". He held up the answer script by the edge, as if it was some

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stinking fish. "It is exactly how a question should not be answered, but I am going to read it out to you all the same", *(surprised looks in many faces)*! "You remember the question that was set for you, the one on Robert Peel. Here is what this gentleman has written". He then proceeded to read out the entire thing, and having finished reading *(with some of my fellow students casting suspicious glances at me , with one particular girl keeping her head down – she was later to become my wife)* he held up the paper for all to see. "As you can see, I have run a blue pencil across three foolscap pages he has wasted, and he gets a nought. But why do you think I read it out to you?" (Pause on his part and silence all round). At this point he permitted himself a grin and looked hard at my direction. . "If only this gentleman had used his undoubted talent to proper use, his ability to marshal the facts he had gathered, God knows from where, and his command of English, he can go far in life. But I don't see how he hopes to enter the University". (He was right, I never managed to enter the Peradeniya portals). "Let this be a warning to all of you", he continued, "we don't want *People's Voice* journalism in our classes". *People's Voice* was a Communist weekly that was at that time published by Trade Unionist Krishna Vaikunthavasan, who was later to make a sensational gate-crash into the United Nations podium in New York. It was thirty years later that I got to know him in Madras.

Mr. "S.V.B" was of course right. With that disastrous style of answering question papers, I blew all chances of a University education. Why bother- poor William Shakespeare didn't have a University education, did he? The very next year I was in Colombo dreaming of a career in journalism.

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# Chapter 4

## Lake House, Sir John and his inauspicious Jaffna visit

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# Lake House, Sir John and his inauspicious Jaffna visit

I joined the editorial staff of the *Ceylon Daily News* as a cub reporter in October 1953. It was around that time that Sir John Kotelawala assumed office as Prime Minister of the country. He was Ceylon's third head of government. He was preceded by the father and son duo – Don Stephen (D.S.) Senanayake and Dudley Senanayake. D.S.Senanayake (68) died in March 1952, following a fall from his horse while riding at Galle Face Green in the company of his fellow Tamil cabinet minister G.G.Ponnambalam. Lord Soulbury, the Governor General and architect of the country's constitution, who was away in England, rushed back and called upon Dudley , who was already a Minister in his father's cabinet, to form the government. It was rumoured at that time that Soulbury, who had a cosy relationship with D.S. had also a secret understanding with the latter to ensure the son's succession. Dudley Senanayake, not particularly an ambitious politician, accepted Soulbury's offer with some hesitation, and pledged to carry on the *administration "so that everyone, whatever language he speaks, whatever religion he professes, and whatever race he belongs to, may live and move on terms of absolute equality"*. He called a snap election and the electorate placed its trust in him .The United National Party (UNP) founded by his father in 1946, and now led by him, was returned to power for the second time. With Dudley's assumption of office, Ceylon became the first Commonwealth country to have had a father and son as successive Prime Ministers.

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Unfortunately, Dudley Senanayake's stay in office lasted only one and a half years. The man who contributed towards the fall of the government (by design or otherwise) was his own Minister of Finance, Junius Richard (JR) Jayawardene. Presenting his budget in August 1953, Jayawardene abolished the subsidy on rice, increased the price of sugar, did away with the free mid-day meal to school children, and increased rail fares. There could not have been a better recipe for disaster. The indignation among the working and lower middle class sections exploded in a fury. A general strike followed, leading to country-wide disturbances. A State of Emergency was declared, the first of several the country was to experience ever after. The army was called in, and a number of people were killed in army firing. Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake, already known to be in poor health, resigned on October 12.

If this was the scenario that Jayawardene anticipated (years later he was nicknamed by some as the "*20th Century Fox*"), the outcome could not have given him joy. Soulbury called upon Sir John Kotelawala, not him, to form the government. One of the first things Sir John did in reconstituting the Cabinet was to strip Jayawardene of his Finance portfolio which he held in previous Cabinets, and assign him the Ministry of Agriculture and Food. Sir Oliver Goonetilleke took over Finance. One Cabinet casualty was G.G.Ponnambalam, who was dropped, maybe because he was a favourite of the Senanayakes. Instead a new Tamil face was inducted. He was Sir Kanthiah Vaithianathan, a non-politician and earlier Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It did not take me long to realise that the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd. (loosely referred to as Lake House because of its proximity to the Beira lake) was becoming a powerful force in the country. Under Press baron and editorial director Esmond Wickremasinghe (father of Ranil Wickremasinghe) Lake House seemed virtually running the government for Sir John; which gave even raw recruits like myself a peep into some of the workings of the government. Esmond's side-kick, J.L.Fernando, contributed

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a weekly political column to the Daily News, while acting as an unofficial adviser to the Prime Minister. His writing style was drab, but he had the ears of the Prime Minister, and the eyes of readers who wanted to know the trend of political events.

Esmond was a tall, handsome man with centre hair parting and given to an occasional stammer. He began his political life in the university as a Trotskyite, that being the done thing at that time. If Paris hosted the biggest Fourth International, Colombo probably boasted the next biggest – the political stables from which the Dr.N.M.Pereras, the Dr.Colvin R. de Silvas and Leslie Goonewardenes emerged. But Esmond lost his interest in Leon Trotsky on inheriting the Lake House editorial empire as part of his dowry from father-in-law Wijewardene, the founder of Lake House. Instead, he became a confirmed anti-Communist. As an ambitious Press baron, he launched a weekly news magazine called *JANA* which he thought would become an Asian replica of the American *TIME.* But the venture soon ran out of steam.

My initiation into newspaper journalism at the national level at the age of 23, with hardly much exposure to Colombo life came as an energizing experience. There was that spirit of urgency and the pressure of deadlines that daily journalism entailed. The *CDN* had four editions – Provincial (sent by the Jaffna mail train), the Kandy, Colombo and City editions, the last-mentioned "put to bed" at four in the morning. Working for the City edition from 10 in the night to 4 in the morning was known in sub-editorial parlance as "the graveyard shift". The attendant deadlines and tensions probably explained the hard drinking and smoking that went with the job. That could also explain the easy, first-name relationships between the editors and senior staffers .One also imbibed unconsciously a towering self-confidence that comes through rubbing shoulders with some of the high and mighty in the land. After all, politicians needed friends in newspapers as much as newspapermen needed "contacts" among policy makers. But there was one antipathy that I found all good newspapermen shared, - a contempt for pompous behaviour on the part

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of any politician. When one encounters any such, politician or otherwise, trying to strut like a peacock, one yearns for a banana peel to throw on his path.

The *Ceylon Daily News* was not only the premier English-language morning newspaper but also the policy "flagship" of Lake House publications, including the much older afternoon daily, the *Ceylon Observer* which was founded in 1834. The Sinhala and Tamil morning dailies of the group, the *Dinamina* and the *Thinakaran* were considered lowly cousins, such was the supremacy of the English language at that time. The *Times of Ceylon*, a paper started by Englishmen during colonial times, was much later to come under the control of a Tamil, Sangarapillai, who was reported to have made his money on hospital contracts. A simple, verti-clad businessman, he had however an able confidant and Director in K.C.Thangarajah, who was to become the founder of Jaffna's first Tamil daily after independence – the Eelanadu in 1956. K.C.Thangarajah, a charming bachelor, successfully ran the country's National Paper Corporation at Valaichchenai. During his time as Director of Times of Ceylon Ltd., he was instrumental in getting down Frank Moraes of India who edited the paper with great distinction, despite its disability of being an evening paper. The *Ceylon Observer* suffered the same disability, but its editor Tarzie Vittachi was to make a powerful impact with the *Sunday Observer*, which was also the Sunday issue for *Daily News* readers.

Esmond Wickremasinghe had a galaxy of talent to work with. There was Aubrey Collette, a Burgher, who was the supreme cartoonist of the day, and probably the best the country produced, apart from Wijesoma, who was to come later.(Collette was one of the last Burghers to emigrate to Australia). Then there was Jayantha Padmanabha, a scion of an aristocratic and illustrious Tamil family, but born to a French mother. On seeing him face to face for the first time, what struck me was his unusual complexion - a tinge of what seemed like olive green! Maybe the blend of Tamil and French blood! He had a Classics degree from Oxford and was Editor of the *Daily News* before

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my time. Later, he was side-lined as 'Cultural Editor', whatever that might mean, presumably because he was too scholarly for the hustle and bustle of daily journalism. He used to do a regular column for the editorial page with a high literary flavour – 'Of Cabbages and Kings', signed 'The Walrus', a take-off from one of Lewis Carrol's children's classics, 'Through the Looking Glass'.

The Editor at that time was an Englishman – or was he a Scotsman? – Fred Moir Brown, who went about with a paralytic left limp hand, liberally using a four-letter expletive in the Queen's English whenever some mistake in the paper annoyed him. He was succeeded during my time by Cecil Graham, an ex-Josephian schoolmaster with a double Honours degree in History and Geography. He was more an efficient editorial supervisor than a journalist. There was the other Englishman, Alan Chalkley, the Economics Editor. Ex-RAF, with a typical blonde moustache, that characterised his earlier calling, he was a good mixer. He used to write a regular Economics column under the pseudonym "*Margin*". When a reader wrote complaining that his column was too abstruse, and the name "*Margin*" too inanimate, he promptly promised to make amends. Henceforth, he said, the column would be signed "*Auntie Margie*" to make it sound more palatable. Chalkley passed away in Hong Kong in 1993, at which time I happened to be there, but to my regret missed the church service held in his memory. I was later told by a friend of Chalkley's that Tarzie Vittachi who was then a Contributing Editor to *NEWSWEEK* had sent a condolence message, which was read out at the church. Tarzie himself passed away in the U.S. years later. There was also Tissanayagam (Tissayan) who kept mostly to himself, but wrote a weekly stylish column under the title" Not that it matters".

With no one to take particular notice of me (I was known as "young Siva" to distinguish me from a bigger, taller, Siva who used to do the Trade and Commerce round), I was to go about quietly savouring the goings-on in the editorial rooms. It was a pleasure to listen to Reggie Siriwardene (so he spelt his first name then, until he Russianised it to Regi) and Herbert Keuneman

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cooing at each other. "R-e-g-g-I-e-e !" "H-e-r-b-e-r-t!". They used to hit it off well. Bitten by the journalistic bug even at school at Jaffna College, everyone around at Lake House seemed larger than life characters. There was the other Reggie, Michael, the Chief Reporter, who covered the Bandung Conference for the *CDN,* ( in later years to induct me into the *Ceylon Daily Mirror* ), and like the Prime Minister of the day, a man for the ladies. There was Shirathananda (Shira) the senior reporter with his bull-dozing ways who once ushered me during my reporting days into the office of the PM's secretary and said: "Nats, here is an up and coming young journalist , give him all the help will you". "Nats" was of course P.Nadesan, that tall, handsome confidant of Sir John, at whose sight society ladies felt like swooning! Once, when going for an urgent assignment, Shira was generous enough to offer his car, a Hillman Minx. I hesitated. With limited driving experience and with no license, I did not want to take chances. "Take it", he said," if you happen to knock down a couple of fellows tell Oscar, he will shape it up". Oscar Rajasooriya was the one who did the police round. He spent considerable time in the police mess and knew every one from the I.G.P. downwards by their first names. Such was the insouciance that Lake House generated in its editorial men!

In another wing of the building were the *Observer* offices with Editor Tarzie Vittachi in command. A forceful and humorous personality with hardly any hair on his head, his satirical column every Sunday, signed *Flybynight* was extremely popular. Both Tarzie and Collette used to take great liberties with the politicians of the time unthinkable in later years. Tarzie used to carry with him a veneer of delicious cynicism; probably the result of prolonged familiarity with the feet of clay of men in high places. One day, a raw sub-editorial hand watching the Reuter ticker tape machine walked in excitedly waving a report that had just come in. "Mr.Vittachi", he gasped, "nearly a hundred journalists are feared killed in a plane crash!" Tarzie looked at him with some concern, and said: "Young man, ours is a crowded profession". Later, as author of the book, *EMERGENCY '58: The Story of the Ceylon Race Riots,* he was to become unpopular with sections of the Sinhalese.

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But the book, the manuscript of which he smuggled to England and had it published by Andre Deutsch, was banned in Ceylon. It will remain as standing testimony to his sense of fairness, personal courage and objectivity as a journalist.

Unlike the *CDN* which, with the exception of petite Vijitha de Silva (later to marry News Editor Bonnie Fernando) was for some unexplained reason looked after entirely by men, the *Observer* had quite a few bustling females, two of whom carried the first name Kshama, one a Sinhalese Kshama and the other a Tamil Kshama. To distinguish between the two, Tarzie named one of the two as "Kashama the Cat"! Ranji Handy whose crowning achievement as a reporter was of course her marriage to SLFP heavy weight Maitripala Senanayake, was also known for some "scoops", one of which was about a ghost that used to haunt the corridors of the Education Department! How she was able to waylay the ghost nobody knew.

Other than Tarzie, the two men I admired most, Collette and Padmanabha, were, I found unapproachable. While Padmanabha had an aloof but courteous manner, Collette was absolutely forbidding. He had a room tucked away from the main editorial office, and one rarely saw him. Once, chancing to cross him on the corridor, I wished him a breezy Good Morning, and the only response I got from him was a grudging grunt; after which I kept a respectable distance. I used to wonder why a man who had the capacity to make thousands of readers laugh would not permit himself a smile. Humour of course could be serious business.

While we in Lake House were getting too cosy in our own cocoon, and our bosses luxuriating in the belief that they were fashioning the life of the country, there were insidious political currents at work beneath the surface. Sir John was unfortunately the kind of soldier-politician (he was a colonel in the Volunteer Force) who, while not suffering fools gladly, was also known to shoot his mouth off at times. He enjoyed the dubious reputation of talking first and thinking later. While saving him from his various peccadilloes

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at home, Esmond was at the same time anxious to raise Sir John's image internationally. At the Afro-Asian Conference of 29 countries held in Bandung in Indonesia in April 1955, Sir John made a vitriolic attack on what he called the communist ideology of subversion of non-communist countries, much to the annoyance of both Chinese Prime Minister Chou-En-Lai as well as Indian Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Although Ceylon found herself out of step with the two Asian giants, Sir John ultimately had his way. Needless to say, his speech was obviously drafted in Lake House; possibly first outlined by Esmond, written by Fred Moir Brown, and maybe given a polish by Padmanabha. Once, entering J.L.Fernando's room – he occupied the ante-room of Esmond's wood-panelled "holy of holies" – I found the door leading to Esmond's slightly ajar and heard him say: "Now Freddie, take this down". There was no question about it, he ran Lake House in real style.

Sir John's first year in office had run smoothly; with no indication of the turbulence that was to follow. He visited New Delhi in January 1954 and signed an agreement with Nehru designed to end (but never did) the long-standing controversy between the countries on the right of citizenship of persons of Indian origin. In April, Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh came on a 10-day visit. Soon after, Ceylon hosted the Colombo conference of South-East Asian Prime Ministers, Nehru from India, Mohamed Ali of Pakistan, Dr.Sastroamidjojo of Indonesia, and Thakin Nu of Burma being the visiting dignitaries. It was Sir John's visit to Jaffna in September that was to prove costly to his political fortunes.

It was Handy Perinbanayagam, a reputed educationist with an eminent past who was to become the unconscious instrument that was to seal Sir John's fate. As Principal of Kokuvil Hindu College he had a telephonic request from the Jaffna Government Agent, M.Sri Kantha. Would it be possible, he was asked, to line up the students on the Jaffna-Kankesanturai Road overlooking the school and get them to give a rousing cheer to the Prime Minister as he passed that way? Had Mr.Perinbanayagam obliged, there would have been

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no story in it. Instead, the G.A. was told he would not like to compromise the self-respect of his students by lining them on the public highway, but if the Prime Minister would condescend to visit the school, the children would certainly welcome him in their own premises and accord him the respect due to a visiting head of government. The visit was duly arranged and it became a public function. In the course of his welcome speech Mr.Perinbanayagam re-iterated his long-held belief in a united Ceylon. He made an appeal to the Prime Minister to ensure that unity by amending the constitution to provide for both Sinhala and Tamil to be made the official languages of the country. Feeling already euphoric over the welcome in Jaffna ( in an island off Jaffna they crowned him with flowers as "King of Delft"!) Sir John readily agreed to the request. His promise was widely reported in Colombo and in the south. That gave his detractors the chance they were waiting for. Although he asserted later that he was misreported - the customary habit of politicians when they find themselves in deep water – the damage was done.

There began a mounting pressure from various Sinhala Buddhist organisations to make Sinhala the sole official language. A newly-formed body called the Tri Sinhala Peramuna engaged in open anti-Tamil propaganda in the Kandy district. More groups began mushrooming everywhere for the "protection" of the Sinhala language and Buddhism. It was evident that Sir John and the United National Party that he headed were placed in the horns of a dilemma. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) under Solomon Dias Bandaranaike chose that opportune time to do a somersault on the language question. At its annual sessions in December 1955 the party reversed its earlier line, and formally resolved that Sinhala alone would be the official language of the country, with Tamil to be made the *"language of administration in Tamil areas"*. Even though this was a sell-out in the eyes of the Tamils, the acknowledgement of the existence of "Tamil areas", perhaps unwittingly made, gave a useful handle to the Federal Party leader Chelvanayakam to strengthen the case for a Tamil homeland.

Hard on the heels of the SLFP resolution, a small, one-time Marxist group

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under the fiery Philip Gunawardne, also chipped in, favouring Sinhala as the sole official language. The main Left parties, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party, to their credit stood firm on their policy of parity of status for both languages. Watching the trends in the country the Tamil politicians were naturally getting jittery. The first Tamil M.P. to make an issue of the situation was the irrepressible Independent M.P. for Vavuniya, C.Suntheralingam. He announced in August 1955 that he would voluntarily vacate his seat to force a by-election and recontest on the language question. He won the seat back with a decisive victory over his UNP opponent, but that accounted for nothing.

Early in 1956, all Tamil Ministers and M.P.s in the ruling UNP quit the party, following refusal by the party high command to admit any resolution on minority rights in the agenda for the party conference. G.G.Ponnambalam, who was a member of the two Senanayake cabinets, but dumped unceremoniously by Sir John, had already withdrawn into semi-oblivion.

The UNP's language turnabout at the party's annual conference in Kelaniya in February 1956 was far more grievous than the SLFP's, not merely for the reason that Sir John was going back on his Kokuvil pledge. While Tamils had always looked with suspicion at Bandaranaike's SLFP, some of them had clung to the UNP till the last. Among them was the turbaned Suppiah Natesan, the not so distinguished son-in-law of the illustrious Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan. He was Minister of Posts in the Kotelawala Cabinet. The Posts Ministry being considered the least significant in the scheme of things, it was traditionally reserved as a crumb for minority supporters.

The change in the language policy of the governing party being of a fundamental nature, Sir Oliver, who had succeeded Lord Soulbury as Governor General dissolved parliament on February 18, 1956. General elections were fixed for April in order that the government might obtain a mandate for the new language policy. Sound democratic principles could have dictated the decision to go before the country, but how suicidal it could

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turn out for the governing UNP was something that neither Sir John nor Sir Oliver bargained for. I was reminded of what a character in a Morris West novel said:- *"The essence of democracy is the right to cut your own throat with your own razor"* The April elections were to bring about the most dramatic change in the country's politics, along with far-reaching and irreversible consequences both for the country as well as the Sinhalese and Tamil peoples.

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# Chapter 5

## 1956: Bandaranaike sows the seeds of Tamil separatism

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# 1956: Bandaranaike sows the seeds of Tamil separatism

Sri Lanka's history from 1956 to 1960, unlike the first eight years of independence, was crowded with events; events that were to mar the life of the country for ever. It began with the overweening ambition of one man – S.W.R.D.Bandaranaike who initiated the Sinhala voters into the illusion that the Bandaranaikes had a primordial right to rule (or misrule) the country for all time. As long as the Senanayake clan had a stranglehold on power (Father D.S., son Dudley, and nephew Sir John), Bandararanaike knew that he would be perpetually pushed back in his quest for leadership. He therefore went for a short cut. The times too were propitious. There was a seething unrest in the country against the UNP leadership. What he did not realise was that, in the process he was letting out an evil, anti-Tamil communal genie out of the bottle. He did not know how to put it back (it was like trying to put toothpaste back into the tube) and that genie it was that took his life as well. His political as well as earthly life since then lasted only three and a half years. Being killed at the hands of a saffron-robed Buddhist monk added to his ignominy even in death. The increasingly assertive bhikkhu battalion was after all his own creation.

There was however no denying the fact that there was a convincing rationale behind the "social revolution" that Bandaranaike helped to usher. In a country where only a bare five percent of the people spoke English – even after 150 years of British colonialism - the English language remained the language of administration and the vehicle of the ruling class. In making Sinhala the official language, he was making a bid to gather to his side the

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vast mass of Sinhalese voters who had hitherto no voice in the governance of the country. Unfortunately, he excluded the Tamils from the agenda. The fact that the year 1956 marked the *Buddha Jayanthi,* the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's death, also came in handy for his electoral needs. By extolling both the majority language and religion, a heady political cocktail, he climbed to Prime Ministerial power. The irony was lost on the Sinhalese populace that the man who did it was neither a Buddhist by birth or conviction, nor one who at the time of the passage of the "Sinhala Only" Act was blessed with an adequate proficiency in the Sinhala language!

It must be admitted that irrespective of Bandaranaike's political motive, the ferment that he helped to create in the Sinhala mind had a positive side. It led to a tremendous release of Sinhala creativity. It was no accident that Saratchandra's *Maname* and Lester James Peiris's *Gam Peraliya* – both landmarks in Sinhala theatre and Sinhala cinema - date back to the year 1956. It was the politician-in-a-hurry in Bandaranaike that converted what could have been a healthy social change into a destructive political force. He permitted mob mentality to take over policy. Every petty clerk in government departments, every little sign board painter, every minion everywhere took it into his head to implement "Sinhala Only" even before the ink in the Act could begin to dry. There was an incident when a gang of men lay across the rail track holding up an "office train" to Colombo. They refused to disperse until their friends who had been taken into custody for travelling in a 1st class compartment with 3rd class tickets were released. Prime Minister Bandaranaike did not only order the offenders to be released, but also rebuked the railway management for not providing sufficient 3rd class accommodation! Such was the power of the mob. His position seemed to be like that of the little-known Paris revolutionary of 1848, Alexandre-Auguste Ledru-Rullin, who one day peeped out of his window, saw a mob pass by, and said: *"I must follow them, for I am their leader"!*

Bandaranaike's 3½ year tenure as Prime Minister could be capsuled into four stages: his electoral triumph in April 1956; the signing of the

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Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact in July 1957 and his abrogation of it from pressure from his political following; the anti-Tamil island-wide riots of May 1958; and finally his assassination at the hands of a Buddhist monk in September 1959. **At each and every stage his weakness showed. People were bamboozled by his oratory and self-adulation but he turned out to be a poor crisis manager. He did not have the courage to stand up to his own supporters who wanted his gentlemen's pact with the Tamil leader torn up. He caved in meekly, and when the whole country was plunged into an orgy of blood and Tamil slaughter in May 1958, he did not know how to manage the situation. Governor General Sir Oliver Goonetilleke who was only a constitutional head had to step in and virtually take over the reins of governance from him.**

The period 1956 to 1960 was one of significance for another reason. A new Tamil leadership emerged, heralding a new trend in Tamil thinking. The realisation had come that Tamils as a people could never expect a fair deal under a unitary set-up where power was permanently entrenched in a numerically powerful Sinhala majority. In a nominal democracy that believed in a mere counting of heads as against equality of all citizens, the Tamils could never make any headway. At the General Elections of April 1956 that swept Bandaranaike into the Prime Ministerial seat, the Tamil Federal Party gained 10 out of the 14 seats it contested in the north and east. To the UNP, the election outcome was shattering. Its parliamentary representation was reduced to eight as against the 54 seats it held in the outgoing legislature. To a party that governed the country for all eight years of independence, that was a humiliating defeat. Eight members of the Cabinet including J.R.Jayawardene lost their seats. The failure of the UNP leadership apart, the electoral result was also an indication of the violent mood swings of the Sinhala voter that was to characterise him in later years as well.

The Tamil man's behaviour pattern was always different He took time to accept anything new. It was said (I cannot vouch for its truth) that the Jaffna man resisted the introduction of the railway because he thought it

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would disturb the hens in the backyard! It was also said that he did not like the Jaffna Urban Council elevated to Municipal status because that could involve paying higher taxes. But once something was tested and tried and found good, he would hold on to it for ever – whether it was the Austin 40 car or Eveready battery or the pensionable government job. It was so with the Federal Party as well. The party was in existence for more than seven years before winning the trust of the Tamil voter. But once the party and its charismatic leader Samuel James Velupillai (SJV) Chelvanayakam gained the confidence of the Tamil people, they hung on to that leadership, with Chelvanayakam becoming the father-figure of Tamil nationalism.

The Tamil leader at the time of independence and during the immediate pre-independence years was Gangesar Ganapathipillai Ponnambalam (G. G.Ponnambalam). Whether his father and grandfather spelt their names with a "K" or "G" was not clear, but the story went that young Ponnambalam fresh from Cambridge with his Natural Science Tripos and preparing for a career in law and politics, thought "G.G" sounded better. He was right. G.G.P., despite his dark complexion and lack of height was a flamboyant figure. A skilled debater, a brilliant practitioner of criminal law, a master of cross-examination in the courthouse, and in many ways was the antithesis of the mild, soft-spoken Chelvanayakam who succeeded him to the Tamil leadership. Both were lawyers, both took silk, one in criminal law and the other in civil practice, and there the parallel ended. Although G.G.P. (born 1902) was four years younger than Chelva, he had an early beginning in political life; unlike the latter, born in the Malayan town of Ipoh, who was drawn into politics through circumstances than through political ambitions.

Although a State Councillor since 1934, G.G.P's chance to make his mark came in 1944, when the British government announced the appointment of a Commission headed by Lord Soulbury to go into constitutional reform. The Tamils had begun to lose faith in the sense of fairness of the Sinhalese political class even during those colonial times. The two Tamil brothers Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan and Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam who

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dominated the elitist politics of that time had both died as disillusioned men. The Tamils were left floundering without a spirited leadership and a sense of direction. It was G.G.Ponnambalam who stepped into this leadership vacuum. The hour had found its man. It was to articulate the Tamil and minority demands before the Soulbury Commission that the All Ceylon Tamil Congress was founded in 1944, with G.G.P. as its president and Chelvanayakam himself becoming his main deputy. His powerful advocacy for "balanced representation" in the legislature for the minority communities, 50 percent of the seats for the minorities (Ceylon Tamils, Indian Tamils, Muslims, Malays, Burghers and Europeans combined) , with the other 50 percent for the Sinhalese found no favour with the Commissioners. They were impressed with his eight-hour advocacy but set their face against any scheme of communal representation. However, in giving vent to Tamil fears over Sinhalese dominance he struck a chord with Tamils both in Jaffna and Colombo. While in Jaffna he mesmerized the public and was called "the uncrowned king of Jaffna", in Colombo he earned renown as the most prominent debating adversary of Bandaranaike in the State council. He held his position as undisputed Tamil leader until 1955, but his taking office as Minister in the D.S.Senanayake cabinet in 1948 was eventually to cost him his leadership.

It was the deprival of the citizenship and voting rights of one million plantation Tamils by the D.S.Senanayake government that led to the split in the Tamil Congress and the emergence of Chelvanayakam as a political prophet. C.Vanniasingam of Kopay and T.Sivapalan of Trincomalee joined Chelvanayakam in opposing the Bills. Speaking on the debate in parliament on that issue (December 10, 1948), Mr.Chelvanayakam said:-

> Today, justice is being denied to the Indian Tamils. Some day in the future when language becomes an issue, the same fate would befall the Ceylon Tamils. It is therefore necessary that we oppose this Bill unitedly.

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That prognosis was to come true eight years later when the "Sinhala Only" Act was passed. On February 13, 1949, the break-away group of the Congress inaugurated its campaign of non-cooperation with the government opposite the historic Hindu temple of Maviddapuram in Jaffna. **The chief priest of the temple, Srilasri Thuraichchamy Kurukkal invited Chelvanayakam (a Christian) to preside at the meeting. Among the speakers were Dr.E.M.V.Naganathan (a Roman Catholic), C.Vanniasingam and A.Amirthalingam, then a law student.**

A new party was born in Colombo that same year. It was the Ilankai Thamil Arasu Kadchi (I.T.A.K) which came to be referred to as the Federal Party. The inaugural meeting was held at the Government Clerical Service Union hall at Maradana on December 18. The gathering endorsed unanimously a resolution moved by Chelvanayakam, **"to work unceasingly for the achievement of a Tamil state within the Federal framework of a united Ceylon, as the only way to ensure that the Tamil-speaking people in Ceylon could live with honour and self-respect"**. That came as a marked departure in Tamil thinking. Thoughts on the idea of separation have of course been aired by individuals now and then, but those came to nothing. That maverick politician C.Suntharalingam who represented in parliament the frontier Tamil electorate of Vavuniya could even be considered the father of the Thamil Eelam concept (he spelt it Eylom), but as a mere general without an army the Tamils never took him seriously. Professor A.J.Wilson, in his political biography of S.J.V.Chelvanayakam refers to an instance years earlier – in 1936 – when two Tamils, Dr.S.Ponniah, a Major in the Ceylon Defence Force and a notary of Vadamarachchy named Vallipurunathan had sent a petition to Britain requesting a Separate state for the Tamils. They had shown Chelvanayakam (who was not an active politician then) the draft of the petition to elicit his views. (*S.J.V.Chelvanayakam and the Crisis of Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism, 1947-1977, C.Hurst & Company, 1994).*

These were of course mere straws in the wind. Unlike Jinnah who did not want to place his trust on Hindu leaders, men of the calibre and stature

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of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and demanded his Pakistan, the Tamil leaders placed their faith in the Sinhalese leadership.

The question of Tamil independence was furthest from the minds of the Tamil leaders because of the very reluctance of the Tamil mind to look for change, until change was forced on it. It called for the political ambition of a Bandaranaike, and his trampling on the sensitivities of the Tamil people to make them aware of the collective dangers facing them as a people. It was in effect, Bandaranaike who sowed the seeds of Tamil separatism, which his widow watered and tended, until together they left the sorry legacy to their daughter to carry it through.

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# Chapter 6

## 1957-1959: Broken Pledge, Riots and Assassination.

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# 1957-1959: Broken Pledge, Riots and Assassination

Having achieved his ambition of office, Prime Minister Bandaranaike was caught between two dangers: becoming a prisoner of his own extremist Sinhala supporters on one hand and facing the growing Tamil threat of mass civil disobedience on the other. It was like being caught between Scylla and Charybdis as in the old Greek mythological story. Being intrinsically a weak politician, the Federal Party threat rattled him. He did not want to face any kind of Tamil uprising within one year of his hard-earned prime ministership, but like all Sinhalese Prime Ministers and Presidents who came after him, his first impulse was the use of strong-arm methods. On May 27, 1957, the working committee of his party decided to recruit a volunteer force of 100,000 to "help maintain order" in the event of the FP's direct action programme taking off in the north and east. Given the fact that there was the police and army to maintain order, this sinister move was nothing but an attempt to unleash a Sinhalese mob against Tamil protesters. By now, Bandaranaike had come to realise that the mob was his biggest strength. Fortunately, some good sense prevailed. The move came in for strong criticism from the Press and even from some members of the government, and the idea was abandoned.

Bandaranaike then went for a more sensible approach. Addressing a Press conference he repeated his announcement in parliament where he had offered to establish regional councils to decentralise the administration. He also said he would amend the constitution to guarantee fundamental rights and "take steps to enable reasonable use of the Tamil language at official levels". He then appealed to the Tamil leadership to abandon what he called

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the 'criminal folly' of its direct action campaign which he said (while holding out a threat) was likely to result in 'untold misery and sufferings for many thousands of people' *(Keesing's Contemporary Archives, July 6-13, 1957, p.15643)*. The Federal Party leaders were not impressed by mere words, but announced their desire to seek a peaceful settlement through negotiation. The initiative they said must come from the Prime Minister. In consequence there began a series of talks between the government and the FP, with both Bandaranaike and Chelvanayakam themselves participating. The one-month old talks concluded on July 25 with a compromise settlement which later came to be referred to as the **Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact,** briefly, the B-C Pact.

The settlement envisaged setting up of regional councils in the north and east with powers in agriculture, education and selection of candidates for colonization schemes; provision for the recognition of Tamil as the language of a national minority of Ceylon without infringing on the position of the Official Language Act; and the provision for Tamil as the language of administration in the northern and eastern provinces. According to his son-in-law and biographer Professor A.J.Wilson, Chelvanayakam was not wholly pleased with the agreement. *"The failure to obtain a single-merged North-East province left him dismayed"* he said, *"that narrow district parochialisms could emerge in the absence of an all-embracing Tamil region". (S.J.V.Chelvanayakam and the Crisis of Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism, 1947-1977. A Political Biography. C.Hurst & Company, London).* Neverthless, he looked at it as an "interim" agreement.

Interim or otherwise, neither Bandaranaike's political opponents, nor his own supporters would hear of it. The very day the agreement was tabled in parliament the UNP made its condemnation known. Opposition to the Pact began building up rapidly. Two members of Bandaranaike's own coalition Cabinet – Philip Gunawardene and William de Silva, both self-proclaimed Marxists, opposed what they termed "wide powers" granted to the regional councils. On August 4, a number of Buddhist organisations led by Buddhist

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monks warned the Prime minister that unless the Agreement was repudiated by October 1 they would launch a civil disobedience movement in Sinhala areas. J.R.Jayawardene of the UNP led a march to Kandy (Oct.4) *"to invoke the blessings of the devas"* for his campaign against the B-C Pact. But before the devas could intervene, an SLFP M.P., S.D.Bandaranayake blocked the way along with his supporters by stretching themselves at a narrow stretch of road at Imbulgoda. This feat earned him the appellation "Imbulgoda Veeraya"! UNP opposition was only the least of Bandaranaike's problems. Communal tensions were building up in the Sinhala south. Mobs were taking the upper hand. Despite all his protestations, the besieged Prime Minister could not appease his saffron-robed supporters. The government made the situation worse by sending to Jaffna government-owned buses with the Sinhalese symbol denoting "Sri" on number plates; a crazy innovation that provoked Tamil anger. An anti-Sinhala Sri campaign in Jaffna led to the defacing of the Sinhala Sri letter on buses and the substituting of the Tamil "Sri" instead. This led in turn to retaliation in the south with Sinhala mobs smearing tar over Tamil letterings on road signs and Tamil-owned shops, and assaulting Tamils. While the police took no action, elsewhere Tamil demonstrators stoned the Bogawantalawa police station in the plantation district resulting in two Tamils being killed in police firing. Their funeral was attended by nearly 80,000 plantation workers, and on April 5, Tamils in the north and east observed "hartal" and closure of shops and stoppage of work in sympathy. In Ratnapura, 60 miles from Colombo, a Sinhala-Tamil clash resulted in two deaths.

Meanwhile, at the annual sessions of the SLFP held at Kelaniya on March 1-2, the Prime Minister defended the B-C Pact as an "honourable solution". Speaking in parliament on April 8, he tried to put up a brave front and virtually indicated that he would go ahead with the implementation of the Pact. **The Prime Minister's hands were forced within 24 hours of his speech, and a public disowning of the Pact followed. The draft legislation was relegated to the dustbin of history, preceded by a political blackmail drama staged at his own doorstep by his own supporters led**

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**by Buddhist monks. About 200 Buddhist monks, accompanied by 300 others squatted opposite the Prime Minister's residence from 9 a.m. The Prime Minister who was away, returned in the afternoon accompanied by some Ministers and listened to the denunciation of the Pact by the monks. After a quick consultation with his colleagues, he announced that the Pact would be abrogated. But the monks were not prepared to accept his word. They insisted on a written pledge. Mr.Bandaranaike went into the house, and Minister of Health Mrs.Vimala Wijewardene (whose credentials in the whole affair were suspect) returned, bringing the Prime Minister's written pledge.**

In order to cover his discomfiture the Prime Minister made a broadcast to the nation the same night in which he blamed the Federal Party leaders' action in defacing the Sinhala "Sri" symbol as "having created a new situation", thereby implying that led to his abrogation of the Pact. It was an abject surrender on the part of Bandaranaike , but having marshalled those very forces to help him to come to power , and become both their leader and creature in turn, it was inconceivable he could have remained an unfettered head of government for long. By mid-April, threats to law and order had become increasingly evident. At "Padaviya" in the north where the government had planted a Sinhala colony with that new Sinhala name in traditional Tamil-occupied territory, the colonists threatened violence against the proposed settling of 400 Tamil families displaced by the closure of the Royal Navy dockyards in Trincomalee. In the face of this threat, the Ministry of Lands and Land Development abandoned the venture. In Colombo, thugs believed to have government support beat up strikers of the Communist-led Public Service Workers' Trade Union Federation. Following a rally of Left parties at Hyde Park, a large crowd went berserk , smashing shop windows, stoning passing cars and setting fire to parked vehicles.

It has been the experience of Tamils since then that whenever violence occurred, for whatever reason, it ultimately turned on them. The Federal Party meanwhile had chosen the month of May to hold its annual convention

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at Vavuniya (May 23-25). In the super-charged atmosphere in the country, the FP Convention provided the short fuse that triggered off two weeks of rioting that was to follow. 1958 was to turn into the blackest year in ten years of independence. On May 22, a train taking delegates from the East to the Vavuniya Convention was stopped by armed thugs, who murdered four of the delegates and robbed the rest. Another train believed to be carrying delegates was derailed on the following day as a result of sabotage. Three were killed, two of whom were later discovered to be Sinhalese. The third was a Tamil policeman in mufti. Fifteen others sustained serious injuries. There were a few reprisals in the East when some passing Sinhalese motorists and migrant fishermen were assaulted.

During the next few days the rioting spread to many parts of the North Central and Eastern provinces. On May 25, the police admitted that in some places the situation was "completely out of hand". Bands of Sinhalese colonists from irrigation and land development schemes, armed with guns and swords, attacked Tamil villages and set fire to houses. Police and army units with limited resources and weapons confronted mobs, in some areas more than a thousand strong. Some of the most gruesome acts of violence occurred in Polonnaruwa and Hingurakgoda where Tamils were cut down with home-made swords, grass-cutting knives, clubbed to death and burnt alive. Nearly a hundred Tamils were believed slaughtered in Polonnaruwa alone on the night of May 25.

On May 26, the rioting spread to Colombo and the city suburbs. Tamils were beaten, robbed, and in some instances stripped naked on the streets, while Tamil-owned houses and shops were looted or set on fire. The evidence of planned, organised rioting was particularly evident in Colombo. The rioting in each area was carried out by hooligans from other parts of the city, in order to hide identification. They were transported to and fro from the scene in lorries, with gang leaders flitting about in cars overseeing the operations. Tamil-owned buildings had been carefully marked out in chalk beforehand. (Twenty five years later, in the State-inspired pogrom of July-August 1983 the same pattern of pre-arranged violence was to occur).

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The same day Prime Minister Bandaranaike broadcast a "call to the nation" which had the effect of worsening the situation. He said, "An unfortunate situation had arisen resulting in communal tension. Certain incidents in the Batticaloa district where some people lost their lives, including Mr.D.A.Seneviratne, a former Mayor of Nuwara Eliya, have resulted in various acts of violence and lawlessness in other areas."

By drawing attention to Tamil-majority Batticaloa and to the killing of a Sinhalese ex-Mayor (who it was learnt later was killed around the same time in a private feud with his estate watcher!) Bandaranaike only succeeded in inciting violence in previously non-disturbed areas as well.

On May 27, rioting spread to all parts of the country. At Panadura, a suburb of Colombo, a mob attacked a Hindu temple, pulled out the officiating Brahmin priest, poured petrol on him and burnt him alive. Elsewhere in Colombo the situation was getting worse. Following appeals made by foreign embassies and a deputation to the Prime Minister by leading citizens, and a threat made by the Left wing Nava Lanka Sama Samaja Party (NLSSP) calling upon the people to defend themselves, the government at last stirred into action. An island-wide state of emergency was declared and curfew imposed from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. The Navy which had a reputation for toughness was called in and a Press censorship announced. The Federal Party was declared illegal.

But there was no let-up in the situation. The Prime Minister was clearly getting out of depth in managing the crisis. Then began a bizarre phase in Ceylon politics. On May 28, Governor General Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, a constitutional head of State, assumed direct charge of maintaining law and order. (For a comprehensive and unbiased account of what happened see *Tarzie Vittachi's Emergency '58: The Story of the Ceylon Race Riots).* Despite the army and navy opening fire in several instances under new orders given by the Governor General, violence continued on May 29 and 30. The first major break-through came on May 30. What threatened to become an incident of terrifying proportions was averted in time by bold action on

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the part of committed army and police officers and civil administrators. A labourer "army" from Padaviya in a battle array of stolen trucks, armed with dynamite, hand bombs, an assortment of knives, swords, elephant and shot guns set out towards Anuradhapura but was stopped on its tracks. Eleven of the gang were killed in army fire, several more injured and nearly 350 of them were taken into custody.

Ironically enough, while violence was being let loose elsewhere in the island on the 23rd, the town of Vavuniya was wearing a festive air on that day. Delegates to the FP Convention (and others like me, mere observers) were pouring in from the north, east and Colombo. The ebullient Independent M.P. for Vavuniya C.Suntharalingam was a strong critic of the FP, but that did not prevent him from going about in an open jeep with his henchmen, providing what he said "protection" to visitors to his constituency. On the 25th, the final day of the Convention, the party endorsed a resolution to launch a civil disobedience campaign on August 20, and we all boarded the empty train that had arrived from Anuradhapura to take us to Jaffna. The mood on the train was upbeat, largely ignorant as we were of the monstrous happenings taking place elsewhere. Party volunteers had persuaded the engine driver to permit the party flag to be hoisted at the top of the engine, making it a Vavuniya-Jaffna F.P. special! By arrangement with the driver and guard, the train was stopped midway between two stations at Eluthumatuval, to enable those who wanted to pay their last respects to the Tamil police officer who was killed on the 23rd, and whose home happened to be there. Jaffna itself seemed surprisingly quiet as we arrived, although news of violence in the south was trickling through. It was not until two days later that angry crowds began to gather in Jaffna town, bent on violence. The Buddhist Naga Vihare in the town was stoned, and the Buddhist temple in the island of Nagadipa off Jaffna was partly destroyed. Sinhalese residents including the popular, long-standing resident Ariya Pathirana were not harmed however.

Meanwhile the refugee movement from Colombo to Jaffna had begun. The government requisitioned five British ships and one French vessel to

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transport nearly ten thousand men, women and children out of an estimated twelve thousand housed in temporary refugee centres. The operation directed by the navy was carried out in two stages, during the nights of June 2-3 and June 5-6 under conditions of complete secrecy. About 2,000 Sinhalese were similarly transported from Jaffna to Colombo on June 3, despite the fact that no attempt was made to do bodily harm to any of them. The government claimed it was a precautionary measure and stationed a permanent army unit in Jaffna under the command of Col.F.C.de Saram, an all Ceylon cricketer. That marked the first presence of the military in Jaffna, nearly two decades before the advent of the Tamil Tigers.

Political commentators and observers of the Sri Lankan political scene who imagine that Sinhalese race hate against Tamils crystallised only around 1983 have to go back to 1958 and read the lessons of that year. It is to the eternal credit of a Sinhalese journalist, the late Tarzie Vittachi, then editor of the *Ceylon Observer*, who had both the courage and the conscience to document the frightening events of that year which the *Manchester Guardian* referred to as "a valuable report, strenuously impartial".

The rioting went on from May 22 until June 3, and with order being gradually restored by then, the government parliamentary group met on June 3. One of the M.Ps present at the meeting made a verbatim report of the proceedings which showed that despite the fact that the Tamils were the ones who suffered grievously at the hands of the rioters (unofficial estimates of Tamil deaths ranged from 300 – 500) the anti-Tamil mood among many of the Government M.P.s was surprisingly strident. That reminds me of a comment on human psychology once made by the British writer Somerset Maugham .It is possible sometimes to forgive a person who had hurt you, but it is not easy to forgive the one *whom you had hurt.* Paradoxical maybe, but true. Some excerpts from that report as given in Mr.Vittachi's book:-

*The M.P. for Gampaha, S.D.Bandaranayake:*-"...If the Government has banned the Federal Party why did the

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government not take the next proper step and arrest the Federal leaders? Why haven't Messrs. Chelvanayakam and company been arrested? They should be behind bars instead of being free to do as they like. It is the Federalists who have planned this, in a well- organised way. The Government is weak and has brought itself into disrepute....

*The M.P. for Weligama, Pani Ilangakoon*:- "I also want to know why the Federal leaders have not been arrested. All over the country they are saying the government is weak. If we cannot govern, let us get out. The Tamils have worked against us, they have plotted to overthrow this government with outside assistance. They will destroy us eventually. Before that happens, I ask that the Tamils be settled once for all .....

*The MP. for Horana Sagara Palanasuriya*:-"The Tamils are gaining strength in all parts of the country where they are. Is this government going to stand for this nonsense? The Sinhalese are in danger of being liquidated by them.....

*An M.P. identified as M.P. for Hambantota, Lakshman Rajapakse*:- **" Destroy them!"**

*Premier*:- "Who said that? Are you seriously thinking that the Tamils must be destroyed? This government has no such intention. I am surprised that there is such talk and stranger still such talk from the M.P. for Hambantota, who is wedded to a Tamil, for better or for worse – isn't that so Lakshman?"

The Prime Minister was not lacking in brave words himself. He said:-

"Certainly the Federalists and other forces have planned to overthrow the Central government and set up a separate administration in the east and the north. But I have thwarted that. Their attempts have been quelled. My military forces are

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now in the east and in the north. **There is military rule in these two provinces, each with a military governor, yes, I say they are military governors. With my army I will see that there is no repeated attempt to set up a different administration in these provinces .....**

Tarzie Vittachi comments:-

"There is a vast gulf, however between the spoken word and the bleak fact. Premier Bandaranaike had certainly assuaged the apprehensions of many members of his party, but **there was that vast, amorphous, mute but powerfull body of militant Sinhalese opinion which he could not appease so easily. No verbal sops would satiate this racial monster. It had to be offered raw meat...**

Under Emergency Regulations, 58 members of the Federal Party, including eight MPs and a Senator were placed under house detention. On June 24, Governor General Sir Oliver delivered the Speech from the Throne to a joint session of parliament, which included reference to early legislation "for reasonable use of the Tamil language". The FP MPs who were under detention were not present. Their absence was made up by the irrepressible leader of the "Tamil Resistance Front" C.Suntharalingam , who moved an amendment to the Throne Speech calling for the *"formation of a Tamil State as a separate dominion within the Commonwealth"*. He asserted that the *"de facto separation of Ceylon has now taken place and should be given de jure recognition"*. He added that partition was the only logical, historical, cultural and economic way out of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict. (*Keesings Contemporary Archives, p. 16374).* The Speaker ruled the amendment out of order. As for the Federal Party leaders, they were eventually released from house detention on September 6.

Earlier, on July 17, Mr.Bandaranaike introduced the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Bill, but not before submitting the Bill to a conference of

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Buddhist priests for approval! This pandering to the wishes of the Buddhist clergy had become a permanent aspect of politics in the country, which in the case of Bandaranaike was tragically enough to cost his own life. However, his promise that after December 31, 1960, any Tamil would have the right to correspond in Tamil and receive a reply in Sinhalese but with a Tamil translation or a Tamil version of the substance of the reply was not kept even 40 years after his death , by the advent of the new millennium!.

1959 was to be the year of the assassination. In assembling the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) coalition in 1956 in his quest for power, Bandaranaike had tried to ride two horses at the same time.- both Right wing and Left wing elements. The Left component was led by the fiery Philip Gunawardene, Minister of Food and Co-operatives and William de Silva, Minister of Industries. Within the parent body – the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) – a swing to the right was becoming evident when the party's executive met on February 1. It was decided that no truck should be had with Left political parties. Right wingers were elected to all key posts. Following this, the two Left Cabinet Ministers resigned, and an enlarged exclusive SLFP Cabinet was sworn in. That was not the only development that was to rock the government. While the government celebrated the 11th year of independence on February 4 with an impressive military parade in Colombo, Tamils in the north and east observed the day as one of mourning. Talk of a coup d'etat was in the air, with the controversial Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) Sydney de Zoysa alleged to be the prime mover. But the inquiry against him was later dropped.

*(There hangs a tale about Sydney de Zoysa, perhaps apocryphal, but one that provides a clue to the man's character. It appears that on applying to the police force for a job he had sought a testimonial from Professor Marrs who was the President of the University College in Colombo .Professor Marrs was reported to have strongly recommended his candidature with the following words – "I strongly recommend Mr.de Zoysa's application, because outside the police force he could prove to be a bigger problem!".)*

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That month saw further tension when the government adopted a Bill in parliament amending the Public Security Act arming itself with wider executive powers to deal with civil disorder. Leader of the Opposition Dr.N.M.Perera and eight other Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) MPs were forcibly evicted from the House after the Speaker had suspended the House twelve times within three hours to enable the police to evict the protesting MPs. Almost the entire Opposition, including the FP members walked out, and the Bill was passed by a depleted House by 51 votes to 3.

There was no doubt that a threat of civil disorder was looming large in the horizon, but the Prime Minister became fanciful in his reaction. He announced in parliament that he had ordered 12 jet bombers of the latest type, armed with rockets, to be added to the defence forces. The planes, he said were expected to be delivered by September 30. He also said that two frigates were expected to join two minesweepers that were already with the Navy. Fast motor boats would also be bought and tenders had been called. Why Bandaranaike thought that such a heavy military build-up was found necessary at that stage was never revealed. Anyway, personal tragedy overtook him even before he could set his eyes on the 12 jet bombers he had ordered. On September 25, he was shot at close range by a Buddhist monk, and on the following day he succumbed to his injuries.

The country had seen the first of many political assassinations that were to follow in later years. The Prime Minister was 60 when he was killed. If the assassination of a Prime Minister was enough to send shock waves around the country, the identity of the assassin produced gasps of disbelief among the Sinhalese Buddhists. As was to be expected, rumour mongers in the city had spread the story that it was a Tamil who had shot the Prime Minister. Fortunately for the Tamil people, the government acted promptly in revealing the true identity of the assassin, which credit must go again to Governor General Sir Oliver who took quick command of the situation.

Somarama Thero, the bhikku assassin, was a lecturer in the College of

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Indigenous Medicine and had sought an interview with the Prime Minister at his private residence. The Prime Minister, as was his practice in receiving members of the Buddhist clergy bent low in obeisance and the man in yellow robes responded by firing four shots from a revolver that he pulled out from his robes. After a 5-hour operation and 22 hours after the shooting, Mr.Bandaranaike died in his sleep.

*(Apart from some newspaper reports of the time and personal recollection, practically all the facts and dates given in this chapter, excepting those quoted from Tarzie Vittachi's book, were gleaned from Keesing's Contemporary Archives).*

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# Chapter 7

## 1960-1961: A woman Prime Minister and Tamil Satyagraha

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# 1960-1961: A woman Prime Minister and Tamil Satyagraha

The assassination of a Prime Minister at the hands of a Buddhist monk led to a flurry of developments. The chief priest of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara, Mapitigama Buddharakkita Thero was believed to be the fornicating political puppeteer behind the scenes. Solidly built, he was a leading figure in the anti-UNP *Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna* and lived a life of luxury, travelling about in a Opel Kapitan car. His close association with a woman minister in Bandaranaike's own Cabinet became the subject of public gossip. "More than intimate" relationship was how an Inquiry Commission into the political aspects of the assassination termed it.

On October 14, 1959, Buddharakkita was arrested along with two other prominent supporters of Bandaranaike's party. On October 20, Minister of Health Mrs.Vimala Wijewardene was removed from office after she had refused to resign. On November 19, she was arrested. On November 27, the Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of police Sidney de Zoysa was sent on compulsory leave. Mr.Wijayananda Dahanayake, an ex-schoolmaster and Minister of Education, who was sworn in as interim Prime Minister, was strangely enough, accused by Opposition members in the House of being involved himself in the conspiracy to murder the Prime Minister. A similar allegation was made against the monocle-wearing Minister of Finance Stanley de Zoysa (a strange sight in the so-called age of the common man!). The finger of suspicion was getting pointed everywhere. Meanwhile, the government decided to re-impose the death penalty and also clamped a rigorous Press censorship. On December 5, parliament was dissolved and general elections announced for March 19, 1960.

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There was an interesting background as to how the unfancied Mr.Dahanayake came to be sworn in as acting head of government. It was largely forgotten amidst the excitement caused by the Prime Minister's assassination and his death on September 26, that it was the very day he was to fly to New York to attend the United Nations Assembly. Bound by the constitution to appoint an acting head of government, the obvious choice of candidate would have been the Leader of the House and Minister of Lands C.P.de Silva, who unfortunately was taken seriously ill following what was allegedly an attempt to poison him. He was at that time undergoing treatment in London. It was only the day before his assassination that the Prime Minister hurriedly signed the papers appointing Mr.Dahanayake to act for him.

The political turmoil apart, there was no let-up in the investigation of the assassination case. While Mrs.Wijewardene was discharged later, sentence of death was passed on the two monks, Buddharakkita and Somarama after a prolonged trial that lasted till May 1961. What supreme irony that in a country where the Buddhist clergy continue to be venerated by the public and the politicians, two monks should be hanged for murdering the country's own Prime Minister! The death sentence on Buddharakkita was commuted to life imprisonment by the Court of Appeal, his living days in jail spent in the laundry section, but Somarama was hanged in Colombo on July 6, 1962. The twist to the tale was that the man who was hanged died as a Christian, not as a Buddhist monk! He was reported to have been converted to Christianity while he was in Death Row and was baptized by an Anglican priest in the condemned cell on the eve of his execution. A Sinhala Buddhist government was thereby able to salve its conscience and claim that no Buddhist monk was ever hanged in the country!

1960 was an year of political instability, with two general elections the same year and change of governments within four months. The March elections resulted in an indecisive Sinhala electorate giving neither of the two major Sinhalese parties a convincing vote. The United National Party (UNP) managed 50 seats as against the SLFP with 46 in an enlarged parliament of

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151, excluding six nominated members. The Tamil Federal Party came third with 15 seats and appeared to be holding the balance. Major casualties at this election included the interim Prime Minister W.Dahanayake himself, who was surprisingly routed in his own constituency of Galle which he had represented since 1944 and two prominent Tamil politicians, G.G.Ponnambalam and C.Suntharalingam. The FP fancied itself in a "kingmaker role", but it was not to be. The UNP was headed by Dudley Senanayake known as the "Hamlet of Ceylon politics". To accept or not accept the offer to form a minority government was the question, but he eventually accepted with the usual hesitation. But at the same time he ruled out any coalition government with the help of the Federal Party, despite efforts made by some distinguished "political brokers" to bring about an understanding between the two. Chelvanayakam's biographer A.J.Wilson mentions the names of the eminent Roman Catholic educationist Father Peter Pillai, (brother of Jaffna Bishop Emilianus Pillai), retired Chief Justice Sir Edward Jayatilleke and Sir Lalita Rajapakse as among the unsuccessful intermediaries. As it turned out, the Dudley Senanayake government was toppled one month after it took office with too many Opposition votes – SLFP(46), LSSP(10), MEP(10) CP(3) stacked against it . Parliament was dissolved for the second time in the year, and elections were fixed for July 20. The FP too voted with the opposition.

Mrs.Srimavo Bandaranaike, the late Prime Minister's widow, had meanwhile been resisting pressures from leading SLFPers to accept the party leadership. The party was headed at that time by a senior member, C.P.de Silva, who was by caste a non-Goigama, a factor that some thought could go against the party's chances of forming a government. Caste had always played an invisible but important part in Ceylon politics. By late May 1960 however, Mrs.Bandaranaike exercised the traditional woman's prerogative of changing her mind. But she laid down one condition. As party president she would, if the party won the elections accept the premiership. She was not prepared to be "just the Leader of the Opposition". Fair enough, thought the party stalwarts and they went on a campaigning spree and tapping the sympathy vote. In their anxiety to make sure they come to power they wanted

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to ensure against a repetition of the March scenario of a hung parliament. Towards that purpose they sent emissaries to FP leader Chelvanayakam, even hinting that they were prepared to take a second look at the buried B-C Pact!

But the July elections brought in a reversal of the electoral trend of March and gave the SLFP 75 of the 151 seats, leaving the UNP a poor second with 30 seats. On July 21, 1960, Mrs.Sirimavo Bandaranaike (44) was sworn in, to become the world's first woman Prime Minister. Given the theory that women in power prove to be more ruthless than men, Mrs.B. was also the first to give credence to that belief. There were no Indira Gandhis or Margaret Thatchers or Golda Meirs or Benazir Bhuttos near the seats of power. They were all to come later. No Ceylonese Prime Minister until then (she was the seventh in 12 years) displayed that kind of ruthless single-mindedness that she did during her two tenures in power. It was quipped at one time that she was the only man in the Cabinet!

Mrs.Bandaranaike married her husband in 1940 (she was 24 at that time), but when she took to politics twenty years later, she was a novice in the game. An official hostess at "Temple Trees", during the 3 ½ years her husband was Prime Minister she did get to meet many world leaders – Chou En-lai of China, President Tito of Yugoslavia, Prime Minister Kishi of Japan, Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia…but she stuck to her role of official hostess, a housewife and a mother of three. The distinguished American economist and one-time US ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith who visited Ceylon in 1959 makes an interesting, and somewhat humorous reference to the country and the Bandaranaikes in his very readable book of Memoirs (*A Life in Our Times, Andre Deutsch, 1981 and Corgi edition, 1983).* I quote in full:-

> I had been invited to Ceylon by the government of Solomon West Ridgway Diaz Bandaranaike, who was soon to be assassinated by a dissident Buddhist monk. My task was to

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review the economic plans and planning in that lovely island once described by a nuncio to Rome as fifteen and-a-half Italian leagues from Paradise, where floral and botanic extravagance nurtures the same tendencies in politics. In those days industrial discipline there was associate by the dominant Trotskyist mood with capitalist exploitation, and so, to some extent, was serious work. Accordingly, and especially among the Sinhalese, as distinct from the more diligent Tamil population, both discipline and work were resisted, often with some vehemence and indignation. Ships were made to wait offshore to load or be unloaded; buses and the railroad ran casually at a huge loss; even the elephants at work in the forests and fields had conformed, one judged, to the leisurely pace. I read reports and consulted at length with the planning board members. Since none of my advice was relevant either to the politics or the lassitude and since these were the controlling factors in the economic development, none of it had appreciable value.

**The Bandaranaikes lived with hospitably open doors in a modest bungalow. The Prime Minister was slight, intelligent and unimpressive. His wife, solid and substantial, seemed nonetheless, to be in her husband's shadow. It didn't occur to me that later and durably she would be Prime Minister of this, at the time, exquisitely ungovernable land.**

Having accepted the presidentship of her husband's party, she is reputed to have addressed hundreds of meetings, only to invoke the memory of her husband and to swear by what she called "the Bandaranaike policies"; which made the rightist Press, particularly the Lake House papers, to taunt her as "the weeping widow". But once she was swept to power she lost no time in avenging the insult. Among the major measures announced in the Speech from the Throne was the government take-over of the two major newspaper

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groups that had been critical of her. Another measure that was announced was the proposed take-over of all denominational schools, run mostly by Christian and Catholic missionaries. Reputed to be prestigious schools (Mrs. B. herself was educated at one of them, St.Bridget's Convent) they depended almost entirely on government financing. There has been a long-standing agitation by Buddhist leaders, attacking the Church for purveying an alien religion and accusing missionaries of being foreign interlopers. While her husband who was a born Anglican who embraced Buddhism for political gain preferred not to make political issue out of it, his widow had no such compunction. Whether it was single-mindedness or political bravado, she was determined to make a full sweep of anything that stood on the way of Sinhala Buddhist supremacy.

The Catholics particularly launched a vigorous campaign against the proposed take-over and the issue became such a stormy one that the Vatican was forced to step in. Cardinal Gracias of Bombay flew in, and restrained the local church leaders from pursuing a path of confrontation. With the Church thus caving in, the government assumed control of about 2,500 schools in the country, with not even compensation being paid. This naturally resulted in the political decline of the Church as a distinct segment of society. But interestingly enough, one significant fall-out from this was the tendency of both Sinhalese and Tamil Catholics to fall back more on their ethnic identity than their religious one, leading to a divide between the Catholics of both communities.

The Tamil leader Chelvanayakam was the kind of uncommon politician who was inclined to trust his fellow men on all occasions. It was unfortunate for him that he had to come up against a fellow woman politician in this political widow. While she was prepared to negotiate with him on Tamil demands prior to the election as a means of ensuring his party support to form a government, her comfortable majority told her that she could disregard all the pre-election friendly overtures and go about with the agenda she had in mind all along. The door was kept firmly shut against any negotiations with

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the Tamil leadership. On the other hand, she went about framing legislation to make Sinhala the *de facto* official and administrative language of the country from January 1, 1961. What was worse, the House of Representatives adopted an official motion making Sinhala the language of the House, with arrangements for interpretation for the benefit of members who did not understand that language. It was nothing short of humiliation heaped on the Tamil leadership.

There was no choice left for the Federal Party leaders except to make arrangements for the proposed civil disobedience campaign, twice put off earlier in the hope that a political settlement could be arrived at. On January 1, 1961, Sinhalese became in effect, the sole official language of the country under the terms of the Official Language Act of 1956. Unlike her husband who did his best under the circumstances to soften the blow to Tamil pride, in the hands of the widow, the law of the land became stark and blunt, without any compunction whatever. Chelvanayakam characterised it as "a betrayal of assurances" given by the late Prime Minister. On January 22, the Federal Party at its convention called on the population in the North and the East to picket government offices, refusing to cooperate with officials conducting business in Sinhala and to resist the teaching of Sinhala in schools in the two provinces. On February 20 began the second phase of the non-violent agitation, which was soon to encompass the entire population of the north and east, including the Muslims.

The *satyagraha* proper was limited to approved volunteers of the party only, who were strictly forbidden from any form of violence, either by word or deed, even under the gravest provocation. But such was the tremendous enthusiasm generated by this resistance movement among all sections of the people, that it gave the impression of a popular uprising, resulting in an initial sharp reaction from the government. On the morning of the 20th, at 7.30 a.m. when Chelvanayakam along with about 200 volunteers sat opposite all entrances to the Jaffna kachcheri (the provincial secretariat), a huge crowd gathered filling up all adjoining streets, the pavements and all approaches

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to the area. In order to clear a path for the Government Agent to enter the premises, the police trampled on the *satyagrahis* with their boots, pulled them by their hands and feet, lifted some of them and hurled them away while attacking them with batons. While some persons in the crowd rushed to the gates and joined the dislodged *satyagrahis,* some others in the crowds outside, enraged by police violence hurled stones at the police jeeps and trucks. The police then used tear gas to disperse the crowd outside, which fell back for a while, and kept surging forward again. Picketing of the Secretariat continued with more volunteers pouring in, and with the numbers swelling, the police abandoned their attempt to create a pathway. The Kachcheri did not function. Among scores of volunteers injured and bruised that day were five M.P.s. A police baton used on Dr.E.M.V.Naganathan had broken and he held up the broken piece. One does not know whether the baton was made of inferior wood or whether iron had entered his soul, but thereafter Dr.Naganathan was to be known as the "Iron Man" of the Federal Party!

On the second day, the *satyagraha* was led by the M.P. for Vaddukoddai, A.Amirthalingam. Although the police were present, armed with shields, batons and helmets, there was a marked restraint in their behaviour. On the third day, the police arrived at the secretariat at dawn and took up positions trying to prevent volunteers from blocking the entrances, but a party of 300 volunteers led by the M.P. for Kayts, V.A.Kandiah, moved up despite the brandishing of batons and a half-hearted use of force.

In Colombo, there was sharp criticism by Opposition M.P.s over the manner in which the police acted on the first day. *The Times of Ceylon,* in its editorial comment referred to a similar sit-in headed by Bertrand Russell at the entrance to the Defence Ministry in London along with 6,000 supporters and commented:-

> It is noteworthy that Earl Russell's and Federal Party's were both non-violent demonstrators, but the significant difference was that while Russell and his followers had to deal with the

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disciplined London police, the Federal Party had to reckon with the Ceylon police.

On the 4th day, the 23rd, women plunged into the movement. Out of 500 *satyagrahis* led by the M.P. for Chavakachcheri V.N.Navaratnam, about 80 women led by the president of the party's Women's Front, Mrs.Rajapoopathy Arunachalam took up positions at the main entrance. On the same day, it was decided to convert the Federal Party movement into an all-party one. The sole Tamil Congress M.P., M.Sivasithamparam (later to become the President of the Tamil United Liberation Front), several LSSP activists, the Mayor of Jaffna T.S.Durairajah and leading Muslims of Jaffna decided to throw their weight with the movement.

On the 24th, the campaign spread to Mullaitivu, Mannar and the Eastern province. On the 25th, a large procession of Muslims led by Muslim lawyers and businessmen joined the satyagrahis in Jaffna. On the 26th, Nominated M.P. and leader of the plantation Tamils S.Thondaman warned against suppression of the campaign and alerted plantation Tamils to store food and provisions for three months should a struggle for Tamil rights becomes necessary. On the 27th, *satyagraha* and picketing was launched in Batticaloa and administration was brought to a halt both in the North and East. On the 28th, an Opposition suggestion in the House of Representatives that talks be initiated with the Federal Party was summarily rejected by Finance Minister Felix Dias (Bandaranaike), saying that the government was not prepared to negotiate under pressure.

On March 1, the government went for a show of strength. Armed troops including naval personnel paraded with fixed bayonets through streets in Jaffna and Batticaloa, causing great resentment among the population. In Jaffna, troops and police blockaded the pickets outside the secretariat to prevent food and water reaching them. A large crowd of demonstrators blockaded the troops in turn, cutting them off from outside contact. The troops withdrew after 48 hours. A *hartal* followed the next day and trains

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were held up by volunteers who lay down on the railway tracks. The acting Government Agent of Jaffna Nissanka Wijeratne, a Sinhalese, was quoted in the Colombo newspapers the next day, as saying – "The *satyagrahis* are well-behaved gentlemen".

In Batticaloa, the Muslim M.P. for Kalmunai, M.C.Ahmed exhorted fellow Muslims to join the civil disobedience movement, and thousands of them led by the 2nd M.P. for Batticaloa, Macan Markar participated in the campaign at Batticaloa. In Colombo, nine trade Union organizations protested to Prime Minister Sirima against the use of troops against the *satyagrahis*. In Trincomalee, Mutur M.P. T.A.Ehamparam was seriously injured in a police baton charge when he and Trincomalee M.P. Rajavarothayam were involved in picketing.

Some of the highlights of the campaign during the first fortnight were :- The complete identification of the Muslim community both in the north and the east with the movement; the spontaneous large-scale participation of women who in many instances slipped through army cordons when men volunteers were prevented from approaching the secretariat in Jaffna. There was an incident on March 2 opposite the Jaffna Secretariat which this writer himself witnessed, which brought a touch of comic relief to the hundreds of volunteers and onlookers in the vicinity. The cynosure of all eyes was a tall, dark, white dhoti-clad person escorted by a posse of jostling policemen trying to gain access into the secretariat grounds. We were to learn later that he was N.Q.Dias, an Assistant Secretary to the Ministry of Defence. In their anxiety to help Dias reach the secretariat premises, police personnel carried him high in an undignified position, stumbled against some of the seated *satyagrahis* and dropped him heavily on the inner side of the low parapet wall ! Two days later there was an untruthful reference to this incident from Prime Minister Mrs.Bandaranaike herself. A few hours before her departure for the Commonwealth Prime Ministers's Conference in London, she made a broadcast appeal to the Federal Party to call off its civil disobedience campaign. While accusing the party of violence, she said:-

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> It is said that non-violence is the essence of any satyagraha movement. But the so-called satyagraha movement carried on by the Federal Party is by no means non-violent. Last Thursday, a Federal Party member of parliament and his associates had attempted to use force to prevent a highly-placed government official entering the kachcheri premises. Last night I saw for myself the torn clothes of this official.

From March 11, the government launched a policy of trying to starve the population by refusing to issue permits to wholesalers except through the secretariat. Returning to the island on March 23 after an absence of 18 days, Mrs.Bandaranaike accused the Federal Party of trying to establish a separate state by paralyzing the administration in the two provinces, and warned that the government might use "other means" to restore order. But like all governments which in the face of popular agitations use the "carrot and stick" policy alternatively, she deputed her minister of Justice to hold "informal" talks with the FP leaders. Negotiations began on April 5 but broke down two days later. Following the deadlock, the Federal Party decided to widen the movement. On the 14th April, civil disobedience took the form of open defiance of the law. In a symbolic gesture, the party inaugurated its own "postal service". 2500 stamps, 25,000 stamped envelopes and 3000 post cards were reported to have been sold out in a little more than an hour. Passengers refused to purchase tickets on the nationalized buses. It was also rumored that the party was planning to form its own police force and take over crown lands for distribution among landless peasants. .Such rumours had no basis in fact but they were enough to galvanize the government into nervous reaction.

On the morning of the 17th April, the Cabinet met at "Temple Trees", the official residence of the Prime Minister and the decision was taken to impose a State of Emergency. In the evening, Minister of Finance and Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and External Affairs Felix Dias Bandaranaike (the power behind the throne) held a series of

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conferences with the army, navy and police chiefs. Governor General Sir Oliver Goonetilleke proclaimed the State of Emergency and assumed power to maintain essential services. A Press censorship was imposed. The Federal Party was proscribed. All public meetings and processions in the north and east were forbidden. A 48-hour curfew was imposed in Jaffna, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Mannar, Vavuniya and four other areas in the northern province. Detention orders were issued on FP leader Chelvanayakam and 14 other members of parliament. That same evening, a special train carrying a further detachment of about 350 soldiers and 15 officers of the Sinha Regiment, exclusively composed of Sinhalese, left for Jaffna. The train arrived in the early hours of the 18th , around 2.30 a.m. and the troops were immediately moved into the sprawling secretariat grounds through the rear.

About 200 *satyagrahis*, nearly 90 of them women, unaware of developments, tired after the day's fasting and prayers were yet squatting or stretched out at the kachcheri entrances. Some of them were in deep slumber. While during the day there were thousands of supporters fringing the *satyagrahis,* there were hardly any at that ungodly hour. The crackdown began. Some police officers emerged first and approached two M.P.s A.Amirthalingam and V.Dharmalingam who were keeping watch. They were told they were to be taken into custody under emergency regulations. They submitted without protest. Once the M.P.s were taken away, army men, some of them carrying rifles, swooped on the passive *satyagrahis*, attacking them with rifle butts, belts and clubs. The sleeping volunteers woke up groaning and writhing in pain. They were trampled with boots, kicked and dragged away from the kachcheri entrances. Proctor S.Nadarajah, one of the joint secretaries of the party sustained head and shoulder injuries. The Tamil Congress M.P. M.Sivasithamparam, who, fearing assault on the women volunteers, stood with his arms outstretched, was himself attacked. He sustained injuries on his face, shoulders and arms. The soldiers then went berserk attacking everything on sight. They pulled down the party's "post office" structure, smashed up cars and bicycles parked in the vicinity, ripping tyres with bayonets and ramming windscreens.

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As the hospital a mile away got filled with injured persons, news of the ugly happenings spread, and thousands of people surged on to the secretariat area after daybreak. While several *satyagrahis* lay helpless within the military cordon, trucks were brought in and the women volunteers were herded in. Restless youths and school students who showed signs of violence were kept under restraint by repeated appeals from party leaders and elders. The troops fanned out attacking anyone on sight and enforced the 48-hour curfew. On the 20th April, when the curfew expired, a 12-hour curfew from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. was substituted. The Prime Minister then went on the air to say that "*The Federal Party has by its actions made it abundantly clear that their real objective is to establish a separate state*". Claiming that the government had acted *"with the greatest restraint and patience"*, she said that *"the government is now left with no other alternatives but to use all the forces at its command to establish law and order.* ***It is not unlikely that a number of innocent people will suffer in various ways in consequence of these measures....For any unfortunate happenings, the Tamil leaders must take the entire blame..."***

By April 24, Chelvanayakam and 58 others, including 14 M.P.s were under arrest, although the Tamil Congress M.P. Sivasithamparam, who, along with his constituents had taken an active role in the campaign was spared. Jaffna came under virtual army occupation. Communication links with the rest of the island (and with the outside world) were cut off. Postal, telegraphic, telephonic and train and bus services were suspended. With military trucks and jeeps plying constantly and at high speed, towns and streets were deserted. Indisciplined, trigger-happy soldiers shot dead and injured persons outside curfew hours on the pretence of enforcing the curfew. Shops were robbed of soft drinks, cigarettes and eatables. Meek requests for payment from shop keepers were met with the amused taunt, "*Get the money from Chelvanayakam*". Soldiers made fun of passing cyclists, harassed and humiliated pedestrians and in some instances attempted to molest women even within their homes at the point of a gun. During curfew hours, residents were ordered to put off the lights. When later complaints were made about this by

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Opposition M.P.s in parliament, leader of the House C.P.de Silva was credited with the laconic remark: "possibly some soldiers misunderstood the curfew for a blackout!". Deaths and sufferings of the sick and expectant mothers occurred for want of medical attention because of arbitrary implementation of curfew orders.; even persons armed with police-issued curfew passes were shot at on sight. With Federal Party leaders incarcerated at Panagoda in the South, communications were gradually restored, but people in the north and east continued to live in fear.

Despite the fact that the 1961 upsurge of Tamil national feeling represented the high–watermark of Tamil unity and collective passive resistance it was to end in failure. It was a failure of ideas, a failure of strategy and a failure of the application of non-violent resistance in a society where violence was not only endemic, but where successful violence was even respected. Having brought the Tamil populace into feverish pitch of emotion, the Federal Party leadership was not ready with any fall-back plan once the crackdown began; a crackdown that was to be expected. That was a failure of leadership as well. If what Mr.Chelvanayakam had in mind was a form of moral coercion in the manner in which Gandhi tried to win freedom for India, that alas, was wholly misplaced in the context of Sinhala attitudes towards Tamils in Sri Lanka. A vast nation of teeming millions engaging in non-violent protest against a colonial power 5,000 miles away was one thing, but for a small minority of people to take on a numerically powerful, racist, armed oppressor next door was quite a different proposition.

But in fairness to Mr.Chelvanayakam it must be said that he was more a visionary than a politician. He had become the unquestioned leader of the Tamils, but he had all the drawbacks that a populist leader should *not* have. Although a distinguished civil lawyer and a Queen's Counsel, he never possessed the kind of oratorical skill that sways mass audiences. On the contrary, he was a poor public speaker, soft and halting in speech, of feeble appearance, with the added handicap that he was slightly short of hearing. Moreover, he was a born and practising Christian in a Tamil society that was

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overwhelmingly Hindu. Subsequently, he fell a victim to Parkinson's disease as well. How he managed to carry all these handicaps and yet command the respect and loyalty of the Tamils for a period of 30 years, while at the same time not falling in esteem in the eyes of the very Sinhalese leaders who were his political foes, is a phenomenon worthy of study.

His obvious sincerity and the fact that whenever he spoke, he did so in measured tones were no doubt factors that added to his stature. When during the *Satyagraha* campaign, Prime Minister Mrs.Bandaranaike made what was a threatening speech, this was his reply two days later.

> At no time did we underrate the might of the Prime Minister's government. We are quite aware that she has powers enough to turn her armed forces against us. We were, and are aware that when the Prime Minister's forces turn their guns against us, we would be as helpless against her armed killers as her late husband was powerless when he faced the gunshots of his assassin on that fateful day in 1959. The Prime Minister has made a radio speech touching on Satyagraha. That speech is more befitting an imperial dictator speaking to his subjects than a speech made by a democratic leader to her people. In fact, the manner and the contents of her speech correctly depict the true status of the Tamil-speaking people in Ceylon. The rule over them is indeed colonial Imperialism. It is noteworthy that the Prime Minister's speech touching on the struggle for freedom of the Tamil-speaking people even adopts the cheap techniques of imperialism. In her radio speech just before her departure to Great Britain, she made an appeal to those whom she called reasonable Tamils, "To disown the actions of the mischief makers, namely the Federalists". This is exactly how the British imperialists replied to the struggle for freedom of the Indian patriots. The factual position is that there is no section of the Tamil-Speaking people, certainly in the northern and eastern

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provinces, which does not fervently support the satyagraha movement.

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Coincidental to the beginning of the Federal Party campaign, the year 1961 saw the birth of the country's first English tabloid newspaper - the *Ceylon Daily Mirror.* Modelled somewhat on the British tabloid of that name, it was an innovative venture of the *Times of Ceylon Ltd.* When Reggie Michael, my old senior colleague on the *Ceylon Daily News* persuaded me to join the editorial staff of the new paper it was too tempting to resist, despite having to shelve my pursuit of the law final exam. The *Times of Ceylon,* unlike the Lake House papers had always inclined towards minority interests, both ethnic and religious, and the newly-born *Daily Mirror* shot into instant public attention by highlighting the Tamil campaign in the north-east. We were a young and enthusiastic team of staffers functioning from the 4th Floor of the Times building in Fort, writing and editing with hardly any inhibition, and with a lot of aplomb and freedom. Besides doing duty as a Senior Sub-editor taking charge of the provincial and city editions alternately, I did various columns for the *Sunday Mirror* employing two pen names – Arjuna and Kartika; the former for the serious stuff and the latter for conducting a saucy, literary column called "The Forum" by provoking contributors, both male and female into joining in a tongue-in-cheek "battle of the sexes". Editor Reggie Michael, a flamboyant figure, a hard drinker with a racy style of writing, and charming in many ways, especially towards women, gave me a totally free hand, with whatever I wrote going straight from my typewriter into print. Journalism at the *Mirror* was exacting, but exciting good fun as long as it lasted. Unfortunately, it was a tiff with Reggie that led to my walking out after giving my resignation. Within a month, I was at J.Walter Thomson's, a leading advertising agency of that time, as an English-language Copywriter on a higher salary.

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*(I am indebted for much of the facts and dates not only to Keesing's Contemporary Archives, but also to Advocate S.Ponniah of Jaffna (later of Botswana) who kept a daily record of events of the Satyagraha campaign and published it at his own cost in 1963 under the title –" Satyagraha: The Freedom Movement of the Tamils in Ceylon.". My own knowledge at the journalistic desk at the Mirror gave me additional insights into the happenings.)*

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# Chapter 8

## 1962-1963: Ill-fated Coup. India helps Mrs.B at Tamil expense

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# 1962-1963: Ill-fated Coup. India helps Mrs.B at Tamil expense

Mrs.Bandaranaike's four years and eight months of rule as the world's first woman Prime Minister was marked constantly by turbulence at home, but compensated by triumphs abroad. The year 1962 began on a sensational note. Having crushed the Tamil civil disobedience campaign the previous year through military force, she herself had to face a military conspiracy to oust her from power. The coup attempt failed, with the discovery coming just in time to save her and her government. On January 28, the country was told of the coup attempt. Just the day before, senior officers of the police and armed forces had planned to overthrow the government. The plot had come to light, it was learnt, a few hours before the plan was to be carried out!

Seven persons who were arrested the same day were: C.C.Dissanayake, a Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG); Col. Maurice de Mel, Commandant of the Volunteer Force; Col. F.C de Saram, Deputy Commandant; Sidney de Zoysa, a former DIG; B.Johnpillai and L.C.S.Jirasinghe, both Assistant Superintendents of Police; and Col. B.R.Jesudasan, Commanding Officer, Volunteer Signals. An order was also issued for the arrest of Royce de Mel, former Rear Admiral and Commander of the Navy. Of the seven arrested, Col. F.C.de Saram was a former captain of the Ceylon cricket team. Earlier, while studying at Oxford, he had played for the University and for Hertfordshire. Another 22 persons taken into custody later included three Lt.Colonels, four Captains, seven police and ex-police officers and Deputy Director of Land Development Douglas Liyanage.

On February 13, Finance Minister Felix Dias (Bandaranaike) gave a

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lengthy report of the abortive coup in parliament, in which he came out with two surprising statements: that the name of the Governor General Sir Oliver Goonetilleke had been mentioned by the arrested persons; and that the former UNP Prime Ministers Sir John Kotelawala and Dudley Senanayake were, according to one arrested person, "in the know" of the plan to overthrow the government. "It does seem a strange coincidence", the Minister said, "that the coup d'etat was planned to take place on the night of January 27, on which day the Prime Minister was to be at Kataragama". Had the coup been successful, Dias Bandaranaike said, police cars equipped with radio and loudspeakers were to be sent soon after midnight to announce an immediate curfew in Colombo. The Central Telegraph Office (CTO) and other telephone exchanges were to be put out of action; newspaper offices, police headquarters, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) office, and other key points were to be taken over; and tanks and armoured cars to be stationed at certain points.

The Minister further said that Col. De Saram had claimed that he alone was responsible for the attempted coup, and that everyone else who had played any part in it had done so on his orders. The plan for the coup envisaged the arrests of only Felix Dias Bandaranaike and N.Q.Dias, because in Col. De Saram's view they were the only persons who could give lawful and effective orders to frustrate the coup; and possibly S.A.Dissanaike, D.I.G., whom he thought was potentially dangerous. (S.A.Dissanayake and C.C.Dissanayake were brothers, identified more by their nicknames, *"Jingle*" and *"Jungle".)* Once these three men were imprisoned in the Ammunition Magazine army headquarters, Col. De Saram intended to go at once to Queen's House and to ask the Governor General to take over the government. The Governor General, he emphasized, had nothing to do with the coup.

There was an acrimonious debate in parliament following Minister Dias Bandaranaike's statement. While all parties condemned the plot, ex-Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake protested against the wild insinuations made about him. Dr.N.M.Perera of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) added

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another dimension to the coup conspiracy by directly accusing Felix Dias Bandaranaike himself of *mala fide* intentions, thereby throwing doubts about the veracity of the Minister's statement. He alleged that the plan for a coup had been superimposed on a plan for the arrest of Left wing and Trade Union leaders which had been prepared by the Minister himself, with or without Cabinet authority. He referred to the fact that neither the Inspector General of Police Abeykoon nor S.A.Dissanayake, D.I.G. had informed the Prime Minister until several hours after they had learned of the conspiracy. Certain parts of the Minister's statement "did not click", Dr.N.M.Perera asserted. The Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) leader Philip Gunawardene demanded the immediate removal from office of the Governor General. The MEP, LSSP and the Communist Party also demanded a probe into the activities of Catholic Action and the *Times of Ceylon* group of newspapers, which they alleged was the breeding ground for the foiled coup. Within two weeks of the debate in parliament, Governor General Sir Oliver was eased out of office. He left the island for Paris on March 7. While clearing Sir Oliver of any part in the conspiracy, Mrs.Bandaranaike told the Senate that there was no question of his having resigned or being removed. His term had been extended in 1959 for two years and he had continued to hold office "at Her Majesty's pleasure" until a successor was appointed. The successor was William Gopallawa, a colourless Kandyan kinsman of the Prime Minister then serving as ambassador in the United States. He took office on March 2, becoming the first Buddhist to hold the post.

Meanwhile, the government had introduced tough legislation making conspiracy against the State a capital offence. The provisions of the Bill were made retroactive to cover offences committed since January 1, 1962. The Bill was the second piece of legislation imposing the death penalty for offences which were not capital at the time of their commission, which the government had introduced within a month. The Bill became law on March 2. The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in Geneva expressed profound concern over the Act, criticising many of the provisions: - the retroactive effect of the law, the power of the Minister of Justice to nominate the judges,

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the denial of the writ of *habeas corpus* to persons detained under the Act, and the denial of the right of appeal. These were "entirely contrary to the generally accepted principles of the rule of law", the ICJ stated in a telegram to the Minister of Justice, while requesting permission to send an observer to attend the trial of the coup accused.

The coup trial began on July 18, 1962, before three judges of the Supreme Court nominated by the Minister of Justice – Justices T.S.Fernando, L.B.de Silva and P.Sriskandarajah. Twenty four persons were charged with conspiracy in the alleged anti-government plot. G.G.Ponnambalam, Q.C., Senior Counsel for most of the defendants, announced at the opening of the trial that he was prepared to produce Rear Admiral Royce de Mel who had been evading arrest since the alleged coup attempt. At the request of both the Attorney General and defence counsel, hearing was adjourned until July 30. On the 30th, Mr.G.G.Ponnambalam, Q.C. produced Rear Admiral Royce de Mel. He then objected to the jurisdiction of the court, arguing that it was not lawfully established or constituted, because – (1) the nomination of judges by the Minister of Justice was contrary to law; (2) the Minister was debarred from issuing directions or making nominations because he had an interest in the matter, having himself participated in the interrogation of the witnesses and the coup suspects. The judges put off further hearing for October 3.

If the coup attempt was ill-fated, so it seemed, was also the government attempt to try the accused. On October 3, the 3-judge Bench ruled that they had no jurisdiction to hear the case. Mr.Justice T.S.Fernando who delivered the decision said that in the court's view the nomination of judges was essentially a judicial function, and that nowhere in the constitution was that power handed over to a body outside the judicature. Nomination by the Minister of Justice would create an impression in the mind of the ordinary citizen that there was improper interference in the course of justice and even that the trial was biased and not impartial. The judgement was commended by the ICJ in Geneva as "bold, fearless and independent". Having dilly-dallied for a month in the face of the judgement, the Government decided to amend the

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law enabling the Chief Justice to nominate the judges. Consequently, three new judges – Justices L.B.de Silva, Kingsley Herat and A.W.H.Abeysundera were nominated by the Chief Justice to constitute the Bench.

When the new trial court met on January 16 the following year (1963), there was a new snag. The presiding judge L.B.de Silva said that Attorney General Douglas Jansze, Q.C. had intimated to court that one of the judges (Justice Abeysundera) had earlier in his capacity as acting Attorney General, taken certain steps regarding investigations of the coup suspects and had tendered legal advice to the government. In view of the Attorney General's advice, the court felt it was not properly constituted and that it would not be in the interests of justice for them to hear the case. For the second time, the court dissolved itself. The coup accused were finally acquitted on an appeal to the Privy Council.

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The Bandaranaikes – both husband and wife, who between them, were responsible for much of the political mess that the country saw between 1956 and 1977, were however adept at switching their interest to foreign affairs. Although when she first assumed power in 1960, Mrs.Bandaranaike was totally innocent of political management, she had however two other advantages. As the world's first woman Prime Minister, especially from a small third world country, she captured the patronising interest of fellow politicians around the world. Secondly, as the official hostess of her self-important Oxonian husband, she had the opportunity to rub shoulders with some of the top politicians of the time.

Mrs.B's first foray into international affairs came with the Sino-Indian war and territorial dispute of 1962. Having already gone in for various radical, socialist measures at home, and offended the western nations in the process, by seizing the property and installations of their oil companies, she was anxious to come out of the crisis-ridden domestic cocoon and enter the Third World arena. Following the brief incursion by China into disputed

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Indian territory, Jawaharlal Nehru of India was a shattered, disillusioned man. China had not only exposed the lack of Indian defence capability across the mountains, but by withdrawing her forces unilaterally, she had also made India look inconsequential in the eyes of the Third World countries. Nehru was in fact forced to eat his pride and seek American help. Mrs.B saw in this situation the chance she had been waiting for.

Fancying herself in the role of a Third World mediator, she called a conference in Colombo of other non-aligned Afro-Asian nations. (December 10-12, 1962). It was attended by representatives of Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Ghana and the United Arab Republic (UAR). Not quite a heavy weight gathering, but that was good enough. Following that conference, she flew into China in January 1963 along with Indonesian Foreign Minister Dr.Subandrio, and had talks with Chinese leaders in a bid to bridge differences between China and India on the territorial dispute. The Chinese government gave a "positive response" (the language of non-committal diplomacy!) to the Colombo proposals, according to a joint communiqué issued by Mrs. B. and Chinese Premier Chou En-lai at the end of the talks. From there she proceeded to Delhi and held discussions with members of the Indian government. Unlike in Peking, Delhi's response was reportedly lukewarm and the Colombo proposals, whatever they were, were apparently given short shrift. That ended Mrs.Bandaranaike's mediatory efforts.

Later, her role in the Sino-Indian dispute came in for sharp criticism in the House of Representatives. Leaders of both Right and Left wing opposition charged the government with veering towards the Chinese line on foreign affairs. Philip Gunawardene of the MEP accused the government of having become "a stooge of the Peking warlords" and J.R.Jayawardene of the UNP alleged that there was a pro-China lobby in the Cabinet. **Meanwhile, the Bandaranaike government had been adopting various steps that could be considered anti-Indian in nature, which in any country other than India would have been considered irritants in bilateral relations. But because most of the bilateral issues affected only the Tamils – on both**

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**sides of the Palk Strait – policy makers in Delhi remained insensitive and smug. This in fact was a pattern that was to persist, even on later issues that affected Tamils. Successive Sinhala governments in Colombo continued to exploit this to their benefit.**

When the Indian High Commission in Colombo sought permission to remit a measly sum of Rs.Three Hundred Thousand (Feb.27, 1963) for the National Defence Fund of India – monies contributed by members of the public – it was refused. The Cabinet spokesman explained that because the money was meant to finance India's defence efforts against China, that would be against Ceylon's neutral policy.

**(Years later, during the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971, when Pakistani war planes could not over fly Indian air space from west to what was then East Pakistan, it was Sri Lanka, again under Madame Bandaranaike, which permitted fuelling facilities in Colombo, - the concept of neutrality being overlooked on that occasion!)**

It was also under Mrs.Bandaranaike's rule that travel between India and Ceylon became severely restricted at both ends. Ceylon citizens – which meant in practice Tamils who maintained close cultural, religious and social contacts with India - were not permitted visits to India except once in seven years. In the case of Indian nationals desirous of visiting Ceylon, they had to get not only letters of guarantee from Ceylonese residents on whose invitation they proposed to visit the country, but also a draft issued by the Reserve Bank of India for an amount enough to meet the expenses of their stay in Ceylon. (Reported in the *Times of India* and *The Hindu,* August 1963). Apart from these measures which were meant to reduce, and almost prevent, people-to-people contacts between the two countries, the Bandaranaike government began to adopt a tough posture on the question of the stateless plantation Tamils of Indian origin living in Ceylon. Felix Dias Bandaranaike said in the House of Representatives that as far as Ceylon was concerned there were no stateless people in the country. There were only two categories of citizens

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– Ceylonese or Indian. If they fail to qualify for Ceylon citizenship under the law, they were obviously Indian citizens. The remedy for those who were refused Indian citizenship was to seek a writ of *mandamus* on Indian government officials. That would have to be decided by the Supreme Court of India. (Hansard, August 31, 1963)

Ceylon Workers' Congress president S.Thondaman reacted sharply to this arbitrary contention by the Minister. In his presidential address at the 19th annual sessions of the Congress, Thondaman said that the problem of the stateless people could no longer be kept in cold storage. The problem "for which our (Ceylon) government is solely responsible" could not be solved by whipping up prejudice against a set of workers who had made a vital contribution to the economy of the land. Neither could the problem be solved by following the course adopted by successive governments of Ceylon of seeking to negotiate with the Indian government the future of these workers who had made Ceylon their home and who had been rendered stateless because of unjust and oppressive laws. The CWC leader also expressed dissatisfaction over Delhi's attitude. He said,

> We are told recently that the Prime Minister of Ceylon has, instead of conducting negotiations with the accredited representatives of these workers sent a communication to the Prime Minister of India. In the past, we acquiesced in such approaches being made as we thought the good offices of the Prime Minister of India might help these workers win their rights, but experience has conclusively proved that interference, however well meant on the part of the Indian government has, far from solving the problem, created psychological barriers.

While the plantation economy has been one of the most enduring benefits left behind by British rule in Ceylon, the poor plantation workers of Indian origin who helped to develop the economy have been victims of all three governments: the British, the Sinhalese and the Indian. While the British

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colonial rulers had imported cheap labour from India and left them and their descendants at the mercy of the post-colonial Sinhalese governments, the D.S.Senanayake government lost no time in reducing them by law to the position of stateless people. Both Senanayakes and Bandaranaikes who ruled the country for the first thirty years of independence were united in the belief that the one million Tamil workers in the plantations at the time of independence, badly needed as they were for the country's economy, were yet a potential threat to the Sinhalese, unless they were kept as chattels, to be thrown out whenever the numbers were not needed. They stuck to a policy of "absorbable maximum" with the rest to be thrown out as India's responsibility.

It has always been the policy of all Sinhalese governments to try to go over the heads of accredited representatives of the Tamils, whether Indian or indigenous, and try to settle the issue. In the case of the indigenous Tamils, they used to look for pliable politicians – men of no moral worth – but useful as Tamil exhibits in the furtherance of anti-Tamil policies. In the case of the plantation Tamils they reached out to Delhi. As was feared by CWC leader Thondaman, what happened in October 1964 was an abject sell-out by the Delhi government; and a major triumph for Mrs.B' doggedness.

Mrs.Bandaranaike arrived in Delhi leading a top-level delegation which included Felix Dias Bandaranaike, her arrogant but articulate *alter ego,* and Minister of Trade T.B.Ilangaratne. The day before she arrived, Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri had talks with the Madras Chief Minister Bhaktavatsalam, who, it was reported, opposed any large-scale repatriation. He had pointed out that his state was already faced with the problem of thousands of Tamil-speaking Indians from Burma. He was of the view that the repatriation should be spread over a long period and that repatriates should be settled in other states as well. But such was the determination on the part of Mrs.Bandaranaike to succeed in her mission that when no settlement could be reached until October 27, she offered to extend her stay in India. An agreement was finally reached on October 29, and confirmed the

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following day in an exchange of letters signed by the two Prime Ministers , in what came to be known as the **Sirima-Shastri Pact.** The following were the terms:-

1) The declared objective of this agreement is that all persons of Indian origin in Ceylon who have not been recognised as citizens of Ceylon or as citizens of India should become citizens either of Ceylon or of India.

2) The number of such persons is approximately 975,000 as of date. This figure does not include illicit immigrants and Indian passport holders.

3) 300,000 of these persons, together with the natural increase in that number will be granted Ceylon citizenship by the Government of Ceylon; the Government of India will accept repatriation of 525,000 of these persons together with the natural increase in that number. The Indian Government will confer citizenship on these persons.

4) The status and future of the remaining 150,000 of these persons will be the subject matter of a separate agreement between the two Governments.

5) The Indian Government will accept repatriation of the persons to be repatriated within a period of 15 years from the date of this agreement, according to a programme as evenly phased as possible.

6) Grant of Ceylon citizenship under Paragraph 3 and the process of repatriation under Paragraph 5 shall both be phased over a period of 15 years, and shall, as far as possible, keep pace with each other, in proportion to the relative numbers to be granted citizenship and to be repatriated respectively.

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7) The Government of Ceylon will grant to persons to be repatriated to India during their period of residence in Ceylon the same facilities as are enjoyed by citizens of other states – except facilities for remittances – and normal facilities for their continued residence, including free visas. The Government of Ceylon agrees that such of these persons as are gainfully employed on the date of this agreement shall continue in their employment until the date of their repatriation in accordance with the requirements of the phased programme or until they attain the age of 55 years, whichever is earlier.

8) Subject to exchange control regulations for the time being in force, which will not be discriminatory against the persons to be repatriated to India, the Government of Ceylon agrees to permit these persons to repatriate at the time of their final departure to India all their assets, including their provident fund and gratuity amounts. The Government of Ceylon agrees that the maximum amount of assets which any family shall be permitted to repatriate shall not be reduced to less than Rs.4000 (£300)

An Indian spokesman explained that the plan was to repatriate to India about 36,000 persons annually (virtually overriding the objections of the Madras Chief Minister- the linguistic state of Tamil Nadu was not carved out then), while Ceylon would grant citizenship to 20,000 persons every year (an undertaking that was not honoured).

In Colombo, Ceylon Tamil leader S.J.V.Chelvanayakam was very critical of the Agreement. He pointed out that many of the 525,000 who were apparently to be sent to India without their consent had been born in Ceylon and had no homes in India to go to. He said, *"It is an unprecedented move in international relations for half a million people to be treated as pawns in the game of power politics"*.

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# Chapter 9

## 1964-1968: The Left capitulates: Sinhala racism triumphs again!

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# 1964-1968: The Left capitulates: Sinhala racism triumphs again!

There was a time during the declining years of British colonial rule when Marxist theory occupied centre stage in political thinking in Ceylon. A highly politicised Sinhala society idolised Marxists and Trotskyites – men like Philip Gunawardene, Dr.N.M.Perera, Dr.Colvin R. de Silva, Dr.S.A.Wickremasinghe. The first eight years of independence under the conservative, pro-West United National Party also provided fertile ground for the building up of Trade unionism and the propagation of Marxian thinking. But the gap between theory and practice made them – in their own language – more of a "national bourgeoisie" than revolutionaries. Their addiction to parliamentary politics was very evident from the very beginning of self-rule, so much so, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Bolshevik-Leninist Party (BLP) and the Communist Party together won 21 percent of the national vote at the 1947 elections. In this, their greatest triumph, also lay the seeds of their eventual disintegration. With Bandaranaike ushering in a "Social revolution" in 1956, and with the widow moving further to the Left, they found themselves effectively outflanked. Their electoral success declined from 21% in 1947 to 15% in 1956, to 10 % in 1960 and eventually dropped to 6 % in 1977. *( A Statistical Survey of Elections to the Legislatures of Sri Lanka, 1911- 1977. G.P.S.H. De Silva, Marga Institute, Colombo, 1979)*

While in her May Day speech in 1964, Mrs.Bandaranaike called for unity between the ruling SLFP and the United Left Front (ULF) there had already

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taken place various "behind-the-scenes-moves" in which the Trotskyite LSSP leader Dr.N.M.Perera was actively wooed to join the government. Formal talks between the Prime Minister and ULF leaders were initiated on May 19 after Dr.N.M.Perera had failed to carry with him his party's central committee on the question of joining the government. But the party's annual conference held on June 7 favoured the entry into the government with a vote of 507 against 179. While making the party veer away from its theoretical revolutionary role, this crucial decision also led to the abandonment of its language policy of parity of status for the Sinhala and Tamil languages. It also led to the break-up of the United Left Front. From Mrs.Bandaranaike's point of view that meant the killing of two birds with one stone.

A further development was the schism that split the LSSP. Radicals within the party moved a resolution opposing the coalition with the SLFP, but they were outvoted, upon which about 120 delegates including Edmund Samarakkody and Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU) leader Bala Tampoe walked out in protest. On the following day they announced they were forming a new party to be known as the LSSP (Revolutionary Section). Although the breakaway group failed to make any political headway in succeeding years, the parent party's image was certainly dented by this development.

On June 11, 1964, a coalition government was sworn in , with the SLFP cabinet of 12 being expanded to include three LSSP Ministers: Dr.N.M.Perera (Finance); Anil Moonesinghe (Communications); and Cholomondeley (pronounced "Chumley") Goonewardene (Public Works). Deputy leader of the party Dr.Colvin R.de Silva and Leslie Gunawardene, a senior functionary of the party had both however declined to take office. Dr.N.M. was clearly a notable acquisition to the Government ranks. A popular Marxist and a parliamentarian of long standing, he was a pupil of the noted political theorist Harold Laski at the London School of Economics. He was first elected to the State Council of 1936, and was imprisoned in 1940 under the wartime Defence Regulations. He escaped to India in 1942, but was rearrested and detained until the end of the war. But for all his illustrious past, it was a

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pathetic compromise on his part that led him and his party to accept office. Even glamour in politics palls after a time when the urge for power becomes irresistible. His reaching an agreement with the government on a common programme meant his accepting of provisions which were contrary to the party's previous principled stand. **Having opposed the passing of the Official Language Act in 1956, and having voted against it, his party now accepted the implementation of the Act. A provision in the common programme also included the acceptance of Buddhism "its rightful place as the religion of the majority", (even if it be the opium of the Buddhist masses!). Offering flowers at the Dalada Maligawa on taking office should not have been too great a strain for this veteran Marxist!**

The Communist Party, although a constituent of the ULF stood out of the entire exercise not because of any conscious decision on its part. It was reported that 23 ruling party members including six Cabinet ministers had told Mrs.Bandaranaike of their opposition to the Communist Party being invited into the government, because that party's support to the Soviet Union in the ideological dispute with the Chinese government could embarrass the country's relations with China!

Along with the glory gained over the Sirima-Shastri Pact, 1964 should have ended as a triumphant year for Mrs.Bandaranaike, but it was not to be. The ghosts of the past were catching up on her. Having inveigled the Left to her ranks, she was losing support from the Right. Her trying to introduce legislation to curb the Press, an issue which had been before parliament since 1960, was to give rise to violent controversy. The UNP under Dudley Senanayake launched a campaign against the Press Bill and the Newspaper Corporation Bill, a campaign which naturally was given wide publicity by the newspapers themselves. While the government was planning to rush the Bills through parliament, rightist dissidents within the ruling party were themselves making their own plans.

The last month of the year proved crucial. On December 3rd, Parliament

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reassembled after prorogation. The debate on the Address of Thanks to the Speech from the Throne brought an unexpected jolt to Mrs.B. An amendment to the Address moved by W.Dahanayake which declared "That the people have no confidence in the Government as it has miserably failed to solve such pressing problems as unemployment and the high cost of living" was put to the vote. The amendment was carried by a majority of one vote – 74 votes to 73. Leader of the House and Minister of Land, Irrigation and Power, C.P.de Silva and 17 other dissidents crossed the floor and voted with the Opposition, along with the Appointed Member representing European interests.

The next day, outside the parliament building there was more drama. Clashes took place between Government and Opposition supporters. The Speaker, Hugh Fernando criticised the police for not taking any action to protect Opposition supporters from pro-Government mobs. He said he himself saw crowds stoning Mr.C.P.de Silva's car. He adjourned the House until December 17. The same day, December 4, Mrs.Bandaranaike announced that she had advised the Governor General to dissolve parliament and order general elections. Denouncing Mr.de Silva's "stab in the back" she said that he had not only helped in drafting the Throne Speech against which he had voted, but had also not at any stage expressed any views against it.

Despite her promise, there was no indication by December 7 of any move to dissolve parliament. Opposition parties mounted an agitation accusing the government of trying to "prolong its life by various devices". On December 8, Opposition parties called for a general strike on December 10. But on the 9th the Prime Minister announced that parliament would be dissolved on December 17, whereupon the threatened strike was called off. General elections were then fixed for March 22, 1965.

January 1965 saw the campaign for the March elections getting into swing. The campaign was then described as "the bitterest in the island's history". There were allegations and counter allegations and a bewildering array of charges among the various parties in the Sinhala south. The UNP accused

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the SLFP under Mrs.B of trying to hand over the former British naval base at Trincomalee to the Chinese under a maritime agreement signed in 1963. (*How funny, 37 years later, in 2001, her daughter was accused of trying to hand over the same base to the Americans in order to keep the Tigers at bay*!).

The SLFP in turn accused the UNP of having made a secret deal with the Tamil Federal Party. The LSSP alleged that the UNP campaign was being funded by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). An influential section of the Buddhist clergy threw itself behind the UNP for the first time, charging that Mrs.B's Marxist friends in the government would bring about the burial of Buddhism. To make the scenario more confusing, the "rightist" C.P.de Silva who defected from the SLFP joined hands with the "Leftist" W.Dahanayake to put forward a slate of 32 candidates under a newly registered party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Socialist Party (SLFSP), while the original 'Father of Marxism' Philip Gunawardene found common ground with the newest salesman of Sinhala chauvinism, Konarage M.P.Rajaratne. The Sinhala south was certainly seeing a new high in opportunistic politics.

Exposed to this politicking was a new, young voter. With the minimum age of voting having been reduced from 21 to 18, the over-18s were getting the opportunity to vote for the first time. The revised electoral register showed an electorate of over 4,700,000, out of which about one million constituted the youth vote.

The elections saw the defeat of Mrs.Bandaranaike's SLFP-LSSP coalition. 81.5% of the electorate cast valid votes as compared with 74.9% in 1960. The UNP won 66 seats, more than doubling its strength, but yet failing to get an overall majority. Other party positions were:-SLFP-41; FP-14; LSSP-10; SLFSP-5; CP-4; Tamil Congress-3; MEP-2; Independents and others-6. Mrs.Bandaranaike who had sat in the Senate in the previous parliament and was fighting her first election was returned from the safe constituency of Attanagalla, which for many years was represented by her husband. Four



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members of her Cabinet, including T.B.Ilangaratne, lost their seats.

The Federal Party won 14 of the seats it contested, but lost two seats to the Tamil Congress, its share of the vote falling from 7.1% in 1960 to 5.4%. In a 3-cornered contest G.G.Ponnambalam of the Tamil Congress recaptured the Jaffna seat against C.X.Martyn of the FP and the Independent, Alfred Durayappa. The Trotskyite LSSP which was expelled by the International Trotskyite organisation of the Fourth International increased its share of the vote marginally from 7.4% to 7.8%. Two of its frontliners Dr.Colvin R.de Silva and Mrs.Vivienne Goonewardene were defeated. With neither the UNP nor the SLFP-LSSP combine winning the 76 seats needed for an overall majority, there began a scramble to win the support of the smaller parties. Eventually, the Federal Party with its 14 seats achieved the role of "kingmaker".

True to form, Mrs.Bandaranaike took her time in handing over her resignation. The Governor General was her own appointee, the pliable kinsman William Gopallawa. Since the electoral arithmetic was clearly against her, it was not apparent what other recourses she could have of retaining power. Even a day after the election results were announced she was continuing to hold endless secret talks, the motives of which were beginning to get suspected. The suspicions grew when mobs began to gather outside her official residence shouting "We will not let our government go!". **Mobs had always played a supporting role in the Bandaranaikes' ride to power.**

But on the 24th March came a major development that put paid to Mrs. B's secret manoeuvres. Dudley Senanayake and Chelvanayakam who had been engaged in talks, came to an agreement, which came to be known as the **Dudley-Chelva Pact**. Under the Agreement, the UNP leader assured that action would be taken:-

(1) To make Tamil the language of administration and of record in the northern and eastern provinces;

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(2) To amend the Language of Courts Act to provide for legal proceedings in the north and east to be conducted and recorded in Tamil;

(3) To establish District Councils vested with powers over subjects to be mutually agreed upon by the two leaders;

(4) To amend the Land Development Ordinance to provide that citizens of Ceylon be entitled to the allotment of land under the Ordinance, and to observe the following priorities in the granting of land –

(a) land in the northern and eastern provinces should in the first instance be granted to landless peasants in the district;

(b) secondly, to Tamil-speaking persons resident in the two provinces ;

(c) thirdly, to other citizens of Ceylon, preference being given to Tamil residents in the rest of the island.

On the 25th, Chelvanayakam announced that his party would support the UNP government. The leaders of the Tamil Congress, the SLFSP and MEP, also pledged their support for a "National Government" headed by Dudley Senanayake. It was reported that the Attorney General had advised the Governor General that Mrs.Bandaranaike should be dismissed if she delayed her resignation further. But she resigned on the 25th. Later, the same day, Dudley Senanayake was sworn in as Prime Minister. That was his third tenure in office, the second in March 1960 being a short-lived one.

On March 27, a 17-member coalition cabinet was sworn in, the largest since independence. The Federal Party declined to hold office by its elected members and instead nominated a prominent civil lawyer and one-time Solicitor General, M.Tiruchelvam, Q.C., who was entrusted with the portfolio

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of Local Government. SLFSP and MEP leaders were also included in the cabinet. Among the Ministers were :- J.R.Jayawardene (Minister of State), W.Dahanayake (Home Affairs); C.P.de Silva (Land, Irrigation and Power); Philip Gunawardene (Industries and Fisheries). Jayawardene was also to be Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and External Affairs, the Cabinet post being traditionally held by the Prime Minister himself. Among 16 other Parliamentary Secretaries sworn in was Ranasinghe Premadasa who was deputed to Tiruchelvam's Ministry.

The advent of the new government saw a marked change in the country's foreign relations. Within a week of taking office, the Prime Minister announced that early action would be taken to pay compensation to Esso, Caltex and Shell oil companies for properties nationalised by the previous government; and in June formal agreements were signed covering the terms of the payments. In July, the U.S. government announced the resumption of economic aid that was suspended in February 1963, and in October the West German government followed suit by offering a generous package of assistance. The West German government had earlier suspended aid in February 1964, following Mrs. Bandaranaike's Consular agreement with East Germany.

The country began the year 1966 by overtly pandering to Buddhist sentiment, and in doing so, the Dudley Senanayake government took the irrational decision to do away with the traditional Sunday holiday. Instead, the "Poya Day" – the weekly day of religious significance to the Buddhists which fluctuates according to the phases of the Moon, replaced Sunday as the weekly holiday. A 21-gun salute in the "sacred" town of Kandy, 72 miles from Colombo, heralded the advent of the first Poya Day on January 6. The celebrations began on pre-Poya Day (replacing Saturday) with the hoisting of the Buddhist flag on public buildings. The Sunday papers bowed out of the scene. Bars were closed on Poya days. The exhortation came from Governor General Gopallawa not to allow the Poya day to lapse into another Sunday given to indulgence and merry-making but to devote it to "contemplation

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and devotion". (We, who were on the editorial staff of the Ceylon Daily Mirror, most of whom happened to be non-Buddhists, did not take to all these kindly. There was one cynical, hard-drinking Buddhist however who was more scornful about "contemplation and devotion" than the rest of us, and who laid down the following maxim – *"All good Buddhists should stock their liquor on pre-Poya days*!").

The testing time for the government came two days later, when the Regulations under the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act of 1958 were introduced into the House of Representatives. And, as was to be expected, violence broke out. These Regulations were identical to those framed by the late Prime Minister Bandaranaike (but never introduced) and were in fact eight years overdue. The 1958 Act laid down that although Sinhalese would be the only official language, Tamil could be used as a medium of instruction, and of admission to the Public Service for Tamil-speaking persons. It also permitted the use of Tamil for administrative purposes in the northern and eastern provinces, and for its use in correspondence with the central and local administration by persons educated in Tamil.

The Act also stipulated that its provisions should be implemented by regulations to be made by the Minister in charge of language policy. But the Act remained a dead letter. Neither Bandaranaike - until he was assassinated, nor his widow who pledged to follow her husband's policies sought to implement it. Jayawardene on whose shoulders was cast the responsibility of piloting the Regulations in the House observed in the course of his speech that blood had been shed on every occasion when Bills were brought forward in connection with the language issue. He said:- *"We have to end this conflict one day. The sooner the better"!*

Outside Parliament, even as a future President was on his feet, blood was being shed! Although a strike called by the opposition parties as a protest against the regulations was largely ignored, some 3,000 demonstrators led by Buddhist monks, marched from the outskirts of Colombo to the heavily

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guarded parliament house in spite of a ban on meetings and processions. The police used batons and tear gas to disperse the crowd. In the ensuing violence buses and cars were stoned by the mob, shop windows were smashed, and nearly a hundred people were injured. The police then opened fire and a Buddhist monk Ratnasara Thero was killed.

Army, navy and air force personnel were called in, and a state of emergency declared the same evening. Curfew was imposed in Colombo and the suburbs from 9 p.m. to 4 a.m. the following morning and a Press censorship announced. The supply of food, water, electricity and petrol were declared essential services and strikes were banned. These tough measures which the government had planned in readiness worked, and on the following day order was restored.

On the 11th January the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Regulations were approved by the House of Representatives by 96 votes to 53, preceded by a heated debate. The Senate passed the Regulations the same day by 18 votes to 7, but all that meant nothing to the Tamil people.( *Even by the advent of the new millennium thirty five years later, there was no effort by any Sinhalese government to implement the Regulations.)*

Meanwhile, relations between the UNP and its Federal Party constituent in the coalition government, although marked by warmth initially, began to show strains as time went on. The initial warmth was reflected in some surprising gestures on both sides. At the Federal Party's annual convention in June 1966 held at Kalmunai in the eastern province, the Prime Minister was invited to address the gathering on the third and final day. He took the opportunity to pay a tribute to the FP leader, and declared that as long as he was Prime Minister, there would be no discrimination on grounds of language or religion, and the Tamil people and their culture would not suffer. That was the first and only occasion in the history of the country when a head of government was invited to address the gathering of a mainstream Tamil party. **But gestures apart, the Convention reiterated the party's**

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**stand that a lasting solution to the political problems of a multi-racial country like Ceylon could be found under a Federal government only**. The resolution had also pointed out that adequate steps had not been taken to implement the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Regulations.

Later, on September 9, Jaffna gave Dudley Senanayake the kind of welcome that no Sinhala head of government had ever received. The entire town was decorated, with the two rival Tamil parties, the FP and the Tamil Congress sinking their differences to welcome the Prime Minister. A reception was accorded to him at the Jaffna railway station, and in the evening he addressed a mammoth gathering of nearly 100,000 at the Jaffna esplanade. As far as gestures went, these were certainly eloquent ones. Both Chelvanayakam and Dudley Senanayake saw in each other a certain sincerity of purpose, not always apparent in most politicians. But in the rough and tumble of political life in Ceylon where relations between the Sinhalese and Tamils were already riddled with mutual fears and suspicions, where politicians on either side of the ethnic fence were forced to guard their own constituencies for sheer political survival, mere gestures and shows of goodwill between two leaders were in themselves no panacea. The fact was, the Dudley Senanayake government was placed on the defensive precisely because the Federal Party decided to join it! A virulent campaign by the opposition was unleashed accusing the UNP of a sell-out to the Tamils, a campaign in which surprisingly the Communists and the LSSP too joined.

The Prime Minister's position was therefore not an enviable one. Conscious as he appeared to be, of his moral obligation towards the Federal Party in honouring the pact he had entered into, he found he had very little leeway. Apart from the combined hostility of the opposition parties to the proposed District Councils, there was the Buddhist clergy to contend with. Besides, there was a cross-section of Sinhala opinion cutting through party lines that saw in the District Councils proposals the thin end of the wedge towards Federalism, which in turn they feared would lead to an eventual separation of North and East from the rest of the country. **Such is the power**

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**of the entrenched Sinhala paranoia in the island's politics, that no Sinhalese politician, even one equipped with good sense, can ever hope to surmount it. Dudley Senanayake did try, but failed to carry through the Dudley-Chelva Pact. But at least, unlike Bandaranaike before him, he had the honesty of purpose to offer to resign for failure to keep his pledge with the Federal Party leadership. But Chelvanayakam was generous enough not to press the point.**

While the personal chemistry between Dudley Senanayake and the FP leader endured, strains began to show in the alliance between the two parties. The constant refrain by FP speakers in public that they stood by their goal of Federalism began to irk the Prime Minister who had to satisfy the Sinhala hard-liners that he was not compromising on the issue. The establishment of District Councils in the northeast was nowhere near fruition. Youth Leaguers within the party were beginning to clamour that the party should quit the government. The FP representative in the government and Minister of Local Government M.Tiruchelvam was himself getting restive and disillusioned. There was no doubt that the 2-year FP-UNP honeymoon was beginning to sour. The year 1968 saw Dudley Senanayake presenting himself as a pathetic figure. A life-long bachelor, he gave the appearance of a man torn between two pestering wives, and ending up as damning both of them!

The Federal Party had its own domestic problem. The M.P. for Kayts, V.Navaratnam was raising the flag of revolt, but on another issue – the Indo-Ceylon Agreement (Implementation) Bill which was coming up before parliament. Mr.Chelvanayakam had got an assurance from the Prime Minister that there would be no compulsory repatriation of persons of Indian origin under the provisions of the Bill and accordingly the party voted with the government. Mr.Navaratnam however defied the party whip and abstained from voting. His contention was that the party had always maintained that while those who opted to go to India must be allowed to go, but those who preferred to remain must be given Ceylon citizenship. The Bill however contained provisions to send away a stipulated number of persons

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compulsorily. The Indian law, he said, did not provide for compulsorily conferring citizenship on anyone unless he had applied for it. The Bill was passed, with 87 voting in favour and 47 against.

Winding up the 3-day debate, the Prime Minister voiced serious doubts about the implementation of the pact within the stipulated 15-year period in view of the country's difficult foreign exchange position. On the basis of a minimum of Rs.4,000 for each repatriate and on an average of Rs.5,000, Ceylon would need Rs.500 million of foreign exchange within the 15-year period. The five-day visit of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in September 1967 did not yield any substantial progress regarding the implementation of the agreement either. A joint communiqué merely expressed the determination of both governments to work smoothly the 1964 agreement on stateless persons.

Dudley Senanayake's half-hearted attempt in June 1968 to push through a draft bill on the establishment of District Councils proved to be a damp squib. Shorn of all powers, the proposed councils neither came up to the expectations of the Federal Party nor did it appease the opposition. The SLFP led by Mrs.Bandaranaike seized the opportunity to mount a frenzied campaign against the government. On June 8, as the prime Minister rose to initiate the debate on the White Paper incorporating the draft bill, the entire Opposition, with the exception of three members, walked out of the House, tearing and even burning copies of the White Paper. While some members kept throwing the torn pieces into the air, a leading member of the SLFP was seen setting fire to the document. Deputy Speaker M.Sivasithamparam (then of the Tamil Congress) who was in the Chair repeatedly warned him, but the member continued to burn the copy before walking out. The members who had earlier walked out, led by the Leader of the Opposition Mrs.Bandaranaike, gathered outside the precincts of the parliament building and made a bonfire of the copies of the White Paper before dispersing.

Mr.V.Navaratnam, the FP M.P. for Kayts who was expelled from the

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party earlier for opposing the party's stand on the question of repatriation of Tamils of Indian origin condemned the White Paper for another reason. He said it was a wide deviation from the agreement that the party had entered into with the Prime Minister. Not only did it not do any justice to the Tamil people, but it contained "obnoxious and pernicious sections" detrimental to the Tamils. Mr.Navaratnam was right. The so-called District Councils were mere extensions of the Central government, taking over some functions that were being performed by the provincial kachcheris. The councils would also function under the language laws of the country. Mr.Navaratnam who was a pioneer member of the party and one of its acknowledged theoreticians had been adopting a tougher line within the party in advancing the interests of the plantation Tamils. He later became the forerunner of the movement for Self-Rule for Tamils and founded a new political party called Eela Suya Aadchi Kazhagam.

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# Chapter 10

## 1968-1969: Tamil disillusionment. "Sinhala Only Act" challenged.

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# 1968-1969: Tamil disillusionment. "Sinhala Only Act" challenged.

The one single experiment of a mainstream Tamil party sharing power at the centre came to an end in 1968, with the Federal Party pulling out of the Dudley Senanayake government. It was a cautious experiment anyway with both sides having to look over their shoulders guardedly at their respective constituencies. In the end, it proved to be three and a half years of uneasy cohabitation, punctuated by some grand gestures on the part of both.

The orchestrated opposition to the District Councils proposals, in which the SLFP was joined by the Mahanayake Theros, the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, and a section of the Press saw Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake in a bitter mood. Speaking in parliament, he lashed out at the opposition for "carrying on false propaganda and spreading communal hatred". He said most people spoke very glibly of communal harmony; the communal harmony they spoke about was "the biggest sham perpetrated on the people of the country". "The unity some people want is the subjugation of the rest, subjugation of another's culture, language and aspirations", he said. "May the country be saved from those who speak of national unity, and then do their utmost to prevent it being achieved". (Hansard, Debate on the Speech from the Throne, July 25, 1968)

With the Prime Minister making a formal announcement that the District Councils proposals would be abandoned in the face of majority opposition, the Federal Party was left with no option but to quit the government. At a

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meeting of the General Council of the party held in Jaffna it was decided that its lone representative in the Cabinet M.Tiruchelvam should resign. The party would henceforth function as an independent group in parliament supporting the government on all issues not adverse to the interests of the Tamils.

Already disillusioned by the government's surrender on the District Councils issue, a more immediate provocation for the FP was an issue concerning the pre-historic Hindu temple of Thirukoneswaram in Trincomalee. Minister Tiruchelvam who had appointed a Committee to go into the question of declaring the Fort Frederick area which housed the temple a sacred site was taken aback with the Prime Minister's peremptory decision to suspend the Committee. Fort Frederick, built by the invading Portuguese in the 16th century after they razed down the pre-historic temple within it, now housed a recreated temple, a place of regular worship by Hindus. In a statement made in the Senate in September, Mr.Tiruchelvam referred to a letter sent by the Prime Minister to a Buddhist priest in Trincomalee informing him of the suspension of the Committee appointed by him. He said: "The effect of this letter is a public announcement to the Hindus of Ceylon that upon the request of a Buddhist priest, however well-intentioned or ill-intentioned the request, the unanimous wish of all the Hindu religious bodies and Tamil local bodies in various parts of the country for the declaration of this area – not the whole of Fort Frederick – as a sacred area should be set at nought. That is the atmosphere in which I found it difficult to continue to be a member of this government". Following Tiruchelvam's resignation, Mr.Ranasinghe Premadasa, then the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry (years later to become President of the country) was promoted and appointed to take over as Minister of Local Government.

A further provocation from the Government came soon after. A Treasury move to discontinue the services of over a thousand new Tamil public servants was given approval by the Prime Minister. These had been recruited three years earlier but had not taken steps to gain proficiency in the "official language", Sinhala. Proficiency in Sinhala within three years

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was one of the terms of employment. Earlier, when they were about to be served discontinuation notices the Federal Party had made representations to the Prime Minister and the move was stayed. The future of 3,000 Tamil entrants into the public service who had entered government service before 1965 also hung in the balance. It was evident that with the withdrawal of the Federal Party from the Government, the Prime Minister found himself under no obligation to mollycoddle Tamil interests.

In the face of a stiffening attitude on the part of the Government there began a unity move among the Tamils. A few non-political community leaders met in Colombo and appointed a committee to bring about rapprochement between the Federal Party and the Tamil Congress so that Tamils could speak with one voice. The community leaders included university professors, lawyers, religious heads and administrators. Tamil Congress leader G.G.Ponnambalam called for a United Tamil Front, but said he was prepared to join hands with the Federal Party on condition the demand for Federalism was dropped – even temporarily. He was of the view that as long as the party retained the demand for Federalism, the Sinhala communalists would deliberately misinterpret it to mean separatism and consequent division of the country. The fears of Sinhala masses could therefore never be dispelled. The failure of the FP to obtain District Councils, he said, was the direct result of the Federal cry which made the Sinhala community suspect it as being the first step towards Federalism. As a political argument it had merit but it did not help in bringing about the desired Tamil unity.

In April 1969, the Federal Party held its 11th annual convention in Uduvil, Jaffna, and decided to withdraw even the "critical support" that it had thought prudent to offer the UNP government. The decision came after four years of Tamil participation in mainstream politics. A resolution passed by the Convention charged the government with practising "gross discrimination" in the establishment of industries and failing to provide appropriate means of communication in the Tamil-speaking areas. It said there had been "total neglect and disregard" of the cultural and educational needs of Tamils and

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a "deliberate attempt to sever the cultural links between the Tamil-speaking people of Ceylon and South India".

In his presidential speech, Mr.S.M.Rasamanickam, M.P. for Padiruppu said that Tamils had been completely disillusioned after having strengthened the hands of the Government for four years. All development projects launched with foreign aid were located only in the Sinhala areas and not one in the north or east. There has been inordinate delay in putting into effect the Tamil Language Regulations. The Government's assurance on establishing a university in Trincomalee had not been fulfilled. He said that the miserable state of affairs of the Tamil people was due to the fact that the unitary type of constitution had made the majority community the permanent rulers and the Tamils the permanent subjects.

It must be remembered that within a few months of Dudley Senanayake's government coming into power, western governments had begun to pour in unprecedented amounts of aid and assistance. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) announced that Ceylon had again become eligible to receive U.S. economic assistance under the Foreign Assistance Act. West Germany signed an economic aid agreement under which the German Federal Republic granted loans amounting to nearly £3 million and additional offers of assistance including capital aid amounting to £1.6 million to be spent on specified development projects. These agreements marked the resumption of West German aid after its suspension in 1964 following the consular agreement with East Germany by the Mrs.Bandaranaike government.

A Steel mill built with Soviet aid was opened at Oruwela in the south in March 1967. The idea of launching a steel factory was first mooted as far back as 15 years earlier by G.G.Ponnambalam when he was Minister of Industries in the first D.S.Senanayake government. But the project was rejected and condemned by the World Bank as something unsuitable for Ceylon. In spite of the fact that Mr.Ponnambalam presented a good Cabinet

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memorandum completely demolishing the arguments of the World Bank, the project went into cold storage. Later, a team of industrialists and experts visited India and sought the advice of Prime Minister Nehru, who placed at their disposal all the files dealing with the steel projects in India. The scheme found new impetus when the first economic assistance agreement was signed between Ceylon and the Soviet Union.

The same week, Ceylon's first Tyre and Tube factory with economic aid from the Soviet Union was inaugurated at Kelaniya. Other projects with foreign assistance included a refinery at Hapugaskande; a key irrigation scheme to benefit the thinly-populated regions in the Sabaragamuwa and southern provinces augmented by a hydro-electric scheme; a State-run condensed milk factory at Polonnaruwa with financial and technical assistance from the New Zealand government; Stages II and III of the Maskeliya Oya hydro-electric project supported by a Canadian loan; a lift irrigation project to increase the production of subsidiary food products, primarily chillies and onions in certain colonization schemes and youth settlement schemes in the south; this, despite the fact these were crops traditionally cultivated in the Jaffna district with the bulk of the produce exported to other districts; a flood control and drainage works to increase the income of 10,000 farmers in six non-contiguous areas along the south-western coast of the island financed by credit from the International Development Association; a modern textile mill in Horana, a joint venture with the Indian industrial house of Birla; a UNDP Special Fund allocation for a water supply scheme to benefit two areas in Galle in the south and towns north of Colombo; Ceylon's biggest textile plant at Tulhiriya near Kegalle; a cotton spinning and weaving mill at Minneriya with Chinese assistance.....truly an impressive show of international aid and assistance**, but hardly any of which was meant to benefit the Tamils, with not a single one of those projects sited in the north or east**! Dudley Senanayake was until then, the first Prime Minister to complete the full five-year term of office, and the only one to get the full measure of Tamil support. It was a pity that the Tamil Federal Party had nothing to show their voters at the end of it!

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There was one major project though, that was planned for the North, but it had nothing to do with Tamil interests. It was for the proposed development of the Kankesanturai port. A foundation stone was laid with due ceremony for the purpose, but nothing came out of it. It all began with alarm bells sounding in Colombo over the Indian government's proposed Sethusamudram project. The object of the Indian proposal was to allow big vessels to navigate safely across the Palk Strait and avoid a circuitous route around Ceylon. It envisaged the provision of a canal across Rameswaram island that would shorten considerably the sea distance between the east and west coasts of India, thus cutting Colombo completely out of the direct sea route. The only way Ceylon could expect to stay on the direct sea route was by developing the Kankesanturai port which was in a very bad state of neglect. A World Bank expert, J.W.Lowden visited Kankesanturai (KKS) port and carried out preliminary investigations on the feasibility of the project. He was reported to have advised the Ceylon government not to delay the project. Mr.Lowden also held discussions with officials of the KKS Cement Corporation on the merits of shipping cement in bulk from KKS to Colombo. But as it eventually turned out, with the Indian bureaucrats dragging their feet over the Sethusamudram project, the Ceylon Government in turn lost interest in the whole scheme.

The year 1969 ended with a Tamil public servant, C.Kodeeswaran, making legal history. A senior officer in the executive grade of the Government Clerical service and President of the newly formed trade union – Arasanka Eluthu Vinaignar Sangam – Kodeeswaran had refused to sit the Sinhala proficiency examination, resulting in the stoppage of his annual salary increments. In 1962, he sued the Government in the Colombo District Court on the grounds that the regulation under which his increment was stopped was illegal and unreasonable. His argument was that the Official Language Act of 1956 which made Sinhala the sole official language transgressed the Section 29 of the constitution which prohibited discrimination. The trial judge, O.L.de Kretser, a Burgher, and the most senior member of the judicial service was renowned for his sturdy independence. He upheld the plea and

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ruled that the Official Language Act and the regulation in question were *ultra vires* and contravened Section 29 of the constitution.

The Government appealed against the judgement in the Supreme Court, which set aside the judgement on the ground that a government servant had no right to sue the Crown in a court of law for salary or increment. The Supreme Court did not go into the constitutional issue, but merely gave judgement on the preliminary point to the Crown. The Supreme Court however stated that if it became necessary to consider the constitutional issue, the matter would be placed by the Chief Justice before a 5-judge court. Thereafter, Kodeeswaran appealed to the Privy Council in London, which set aside the Ceylon Supreme Court's decision and directed that the Supreme Court should rule on the constitutional question. Kodeeswaran's case never came up before the Supreme Court, because political events had intervened to nullify the whole judicial process. Mrs.Bandaranaike who came to power in 1970 saw to it that appeals to the Privy Council were abolished.

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# Chapter 11

## 1970: Mrs. B again. Austerity and a gallop in the historical process

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# 1970: Mrs. B again. Austerity and a gallop in the historical process

If the historical process in Sri Lanka is to be measured in terms of speed, the years 1970 onwards could be described as a gallop! It began with Mrs.Bandaranaike's unprecedented landslide victory at the 1970 elections. The SLFP-Left wing coalition headed by her captured 115 of the 150 seats it contested. One of the seats had already gone to the SLFP without a contest. The UNP which had been on the saddle for five virtually peaceful years managed a mere 17 seats, an electoral punishment by the Sinhala voters which one would think that the party did not deserve. But the moral was clear: no Sinhalese party that tries to be conciliatory to Tamil interests could ever hope to survive in Sri Lankan politics. The LSSP, now consorting with Sinhala hegemonic policies won 19 seats, a big leap from its 10 seats five years earlier. The Communist Party increased its tally from four to six. The Federal Party, which in the process lost its bargaining position as well, won 13, and the Tamil Congress three. There were only two Independents this time, compared with six in the previous parliament. More than 85 percent of the electorate went to the polls

Mrs.Bandaranaike won with a personal majority of 21,000 votes, while the outgoing Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake scraped through with a slender lead of 1,067 votes. Eleven of the UNP Cabinet Ministers lost their seats. Besides Mrs.Bandaranaike, five other women candidates, all members of the SLFP-Left wing coalition were returned. In a major reversal of fortunes in

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the north, A.Amirthalingam lost his seat at Vaddukoddai to A.Thiagarajah of the Tamil Congress, while Tamil Congress leader G.G.Ponnambalam came third in Jaffna in a triangular contest, with the FP candidate C.X.Martyn being returned, edging out Alfred Durayappa, Independent, into second place, by a mere 56 votes.

On May 29, Mrs.Bandaranaike (54) was sworn in as Prime Minister for a second time. Her very swearing-in was accompanied by rowdyism and violence in the city and in some other areas. Crowds of her supporters stormed Lake House, the premises of the Associated Newspapers Ltd. which published newspapers in all three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English. The rioters who resented the support given by these papers to the outgoing government broke through a police cordon, stormed the offices, burnt the library and newspaper files, smashed glass windows and wrecked the furniture and equipment. Elsewhere, rioters killed a police inspector at Dedigama, the outgoing Prime Minister's constituency, 35 miles from Colombo.

On May 31, a 21-member cabinet was sworn in, the biggest since independence. (*Twenty years later the Prime Minister's daughter President Chandrika was to double it for a jumbo Cabinet of 45!)* Mrs.Bandaranaike's Cabinet comprised 17 SLFP members, three from the LSSP and one from the Communist Party. The LSSP Ministers were Dr.N.M.Perera (Finance), Dr.Colvin R. de Silva (Plantation Industry) and Leslie Goonewardene (Communications). Communist Party leader Pieter Keuneman was given charge of Housing and Construction. The sole Muslim in the Cabinet Baduidin Mahmud became Minister of Education. A Tamil, unknown until then in politics or public life was nominated to parliament and given charge of Posts and Telecommunications – a portfolio, as has been mentioned earlier, traditionally and somewhat condescendingly reserved for members of minority communities. (Earlier holders of this portfolio included C.Sittampalam, S.Natesan, V.Nalliah and C.A.S.Marikkar)

One of the first acts of the government on assuming office was to impose

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a ban on what it considered non-essential items, as part of an austerity drive. The banned items ranged from crockery and cutlery to electric irons, transistor radios and torch lights! But this was only the beginning. What a far-reaching political agenda the government had in mind was revealed in the Speech from the Throne of the first session of the Seventh Parliament on June14.

A new constitution was to be drafted to declare Ceylon "*a free, sovereign and independent Republic*" thus ending the existing link with the British monarchy within the Commonwealth. Banks and foreign trade were to be nationalised. The State was to take control of the tea, rubber and coconut plantation industries managed by British-owned Agency Houses. All *"subversive imperialist agencies"* operating in Ceylon were to be wound up. Machinery was to be set up to inquire into and deal with "all cases of gross abuse of State power under the former government". In the area of foreign relations, the Government would accord recognition to North Vietnam, North Korea, Viet Cong Provisional Revolutionary Government in South Vietnam and East Germany. Relations with Israel would be suspended pending an agreed settlement in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Government lost no time in translating into action whatever was promised in the Throne Speech. On July 19, members of the House of Representatives constituting themselves into a Constituent Assembly, met at "Navarangahala" , the auditorium of the Royal Junior School in Colombo. Prime Minister Mrs.Bandaranaike said in the course of her speech,

> We have met in this hall to emphasise the fact that this is a meeting of the House of representatives as representatives of the people of Sri Lanka, but not a meeting of the House of Representatives. We have adopted this course to underline the fact that both the Constituent Assembly which we have meant to establish, and the constitution which the Constituent Assembly will draft, enact, and establish, will derive their authority from

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> the people of Sri Lanka, and not from the power and authority assumed and exercised by the British Crown and Parliament in establishing the present Constitution of Ceylon, nor from the Constitution they gave us.

Earlier, at the end of a 3-day debate which took place in the chamber of the House of Representatives, the resolution for the establishing of a Republican constitution, proposed by Mrs.Bandaranaike and seconded by Dr.N.M.Perera was unanimously approved, supported by all the opposition parties, the UNP, the FP and the Tamil Congress. Stanley Tillekeratne , a dimunitive Leftist firebrand was elected President of the proposed Assembly. The Marxist scholar-lawyer and deputy leader of the LSSP Dr.Colvin R.de Silva was elected to head the drafting committee of the new constitution.

In foreign relations, developments were equally swift. East Germany was accorded full recognition. Diplomatic relations with North Korea was announced for the first time. Diplomatic relations with Israel was suspended with immediate effect on July 29. But the warmest gestures were between China and the new government. After a lapse of four years, China announced the appointment of an ambassador to Colombo. (*During UNP rule the embassy was headed by a Charge d'Affaires although Ceylon had an ambassador in Peking*). In September, a 5-member trade delegation headed by Minister of Foreign and Internal Trade T.B.Ilangaratne visited Peking and negotiated an interest-free loan for buying 100,000 tons of rice which China had been providing annually under the Sino-Ceylon Rubber-Rice trade agreement. That agreement was entered into, under UNP rule itself as early as 1952. From Peking the delegation proceeded to Pyongyang, capital of North Korea and signed two agreements and protocols. In November, an Ilangaratne delegation paid an official visit to the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) as well.

It is a fact worth noticing that Ceylon's large and closest neighbour India, with centuries' old ties, historical, religious, cultural and ethnic

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never seemed to loom large in the little island's policy calculations. As far as Mrs. Bandaranaike was concerned she had always kept close friendship with far-away China as the cornerstone of her foreign policy. One of the tangible rewards of that friendship was the elegant Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH), a free gift from China. Work on it was inaugurated by Mrs.Bandaranaike in November at an estimated cost of Rs.35 million. As for India, it appeared to be a policy of feigning friendship in order to:- (1) solve bilateral problems between the two countries and solve them at India's expense; (2) to limit Indian influence in the island , flowing particularly from the ethnic, cultural and religious nexus between the South Indian mainland and Tamil-dominated Jaffna. In pursuance of the latter objective, her government decided to prohibit or reduce drastically the import of Tamil books, newspapers and periodicals from India. It was also proposed to stop broadcasting South Indian Tamil film music over Radio Ceylon but wiser counsels prevailed later.

Mrs.Bandaranaike who had already had her way with India over the Sirima-Shastri Pact during her previous tenure of office, was now poised for another success over the ownership of the barren, uninhabited islet of Kachchativu lying between the two countries. She informed Delhi of her government's intention to extend the island's territorial waters from six to twelve nautical miles in keeping with the international trend. India had already extended the limits of her territorial sea to twelve nautical miles as from September 30, 1967. It was agreed a solution to the ownership of Kachchativu could be found by drawing a median line between the two sea limits. It was no surprise eventually when the median line placed the islet closer to Ceylon.

Kachchativu, a piece of barren real estate once owned by the Raja of Ramnad (Ramanathapuram in India) was a no-man's land, with a small chapel dedicated to St.Anthony at its western tip. The chapel was built through donations by devout Christians between 1894 and 1905, when both countries were under British rule. It was visited by pilgrims from both

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countries in March every year, and was also used by Indian fishermen to dry their nets. When the islet was ceded to Ceylon there was an outcry from opposition members in the Indian parliament. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi answered her critics by saying that it was "only a piece of rock". That "piece of rock" was to remain a burning issue between the two governments for years to come.

The year 1970 ended with a self-assured Mrs.Bandaranaike at the height of her power but with no signs of improvement in the country's economic front. Apart from growing unemployment and rising prices, there was a scarcity of essential items. As the first six months of her new dispensation ended, there was not even an inkling of the cataclysm that was to rock the government the following year. Among the many myths which Sinhala Buddhists used to hug to their hearts was their belief that no violent uprising was possible in that "thrice blessed land" – the Dhamma Deepa – visited by the Buddha and protected by (the Hindu) God Vishnu! That myth was to be shattered the following year.

**Postscript**: *One of the "subversive imperialist agencies" that the government had apparently in mind was a leading advertising agency of that time – J.Walter Thompson (JWT) International; and I, to my misfortune happened to be an employee of that American outfit. Having quit the Ceylon Daily Mirror the previous year I had joined the JWT's creative team as a well-paid English-language Copywriter. It was a fascinating and challenging job apart from the fact that Advertising had emerged as a new, lucrative career. The problem JWT had with Mrs.Bandaranaike's government had begun well before it came to power in the 1970 elections. The SLFP's Sinhala propaganda sheet, Srilakha had carried a damning report on JWT accusing it of being an American CIA organisation and naming its manager Bill Campbell of being a CIA spy. Truth or otherwise, the accusation was not based on any credible evidence. JWT promptly sued the paper on a charge of defaming its international image and reputation and claimed damages to the tune of several millions. Campbell himself*

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*filed a suit in his private capacity claiming personal damages. The case had been heard before courts and JWT stood poised to get substantial damages. But alas, before judgment could be given the 1970 elections intervened and Mrs.B stormed into power.*

*During the election campaign itself, Ilangaratne and other SLFP politicians were threatening multinational firms, some of whom were JWT's clients, with dire consequences should they come to power. Bill Campbell, a youngish American, lost his nerve and fled abroad as the election results came in. His hasty act of throwing in the towel made it difficult to continue operations with any certainty. JWT International flew in its Vice President Tom Sutton with the hope of mending things, but the damage was done. It was decided to pull out operations from Colombo and hand over the agency to the local senior executives with permission to use the Thompson name for a limited period. We were then told the bad news. Whoever who was prepared to continue working for the agency could do so, but on half pay; alternatively, compensation would be paid for loss of career for those who wished to quit. I had been long wanting to run a journal of my own, and the promise of American capital was tempting. I chose the latter course. We lined up to the Manager's office and walked out with bulging envelopes with hard cash! Having never had the pleasure of handling so much cash during my journalistic years, the thought did not seep in that I was also walking out jobless. But then, there was that dream of being the editor-owner of a monthly journal .*

*The magazine, a monthly, with a 5-colour cover was named* **Leisure**. *As the title suggested, the contents were geared for leisured middle class reading. A model was to adorn the cover. I had used my JWT contacts to get enough advertising contracts to cover the cost of printing and to pay myself and my Business Manager, FT, an old colleague from the Daily Mirror. FT was never without a tie, he had an erect bearing and a brisk walk, and with the Bond case I had given him, he made a good front for Leisure, while I went about my editorial functions in discreet anonymity.*

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*Every prospect seemed sunny and pleasing. How was one to know that Fate was waiting in the shadows with its own agenda?* ***The day I launched the first issue of my magazine – April 5, 1971 – was the day the Jathika Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) launched its infamous insurgency! What a timing on my part! The next few months saw the country in a whirl. All business activity stood paralysed .The promised advertising did not come. Undaunted, I published two more issues. The bookshop sales were encouraging, but I ran through the last of the "American capital" and that was that.***

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# Chapter 12

## 1971: Sinhala Insurgency, Terrorism and State Authoritarianism.

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# 1971: Sinhala Insurgency, Terrorism and State Authoritarianism.

The year 1971 will always be remembered for the haunting memories of the Sinhalese youth insurrection, for the first organised assault on State power, for its unprecedented army and police excesses, and for the blood bath that accounted for the lives of more than 10,000 Sinhalese youths; misguided, revolutionary romanticists as they were termed, but nevertheless constituting perhaps the finest flower of Sinhala youths of that time. It was a planned revolution that never went according to plan.

The organisation that led the revolt was the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) , a Guevarist movement named after the famed guerrilla leader "Che" Guevara, who was killed in Bolivia in 1967. The man who founded the organisation in 1967, and planned the uprising, was Rohana Wijeweera (27), a fiery Marxist and ex-student of the Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow. When Wijewera during a sojourn in his home country in 1968 chose to adopt the Chinese Mao line in the doctrinal dispute with Moscow, he was denied a visa back to Moscow; and was found to have made a clandestine trip to North Korea thereafter.

The JVP was an organisation that was fundamentally opposed to all parties in the island's political spectrum – Right, Left and Centre. The traditional old Left, represented by the Trotskyite LSSP and the Moscow-led Communist Party, revolutionary in theory but hardly so in practice, had of course lost whatever charm or credibility they had after they linked hands with the SLFP

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under Mrs.Bandaranaike. Ironically, Mrs.Bandaranaike who had only the previous year ushered in a government markedly Left-wing in character was herself found wanting by Wijeweera's autarchic yardstick. Parliamentary politics, he held, was not the answer to the economic difficulties that the country faced. ( *It is interesting to note that around the same time, there was emerging a Tamil radical youth movement that was disillusioned with Parliamentary politics, and thought that Tamils should be looking for other options to win their rights*).

It was known for some time that Rohana Wijeweera was holding classes on the theory of revolution in many parts of the southern interior . Known as the "Five Classes", including one on "Indian imperialist expansion", they attracted a large number of educated Sinhalese youths who were spurred by his ideological fervour and impassioned oratory. But it was not known until later that there were also parallel secret classes addressed by masked men, that were meant to prepare the youths for mass violent action that was being planned. To its discredit, the JVP betrayed its hand prematurely. A hand bomb manufactory in Dedigama exploded, killing five youths. The US Embassy in Colombo was attacked with hand bombs on March 6, following a demonstration in which a police inspector was fatally stabbed. An embarrassed Mrs.Bandaranaike, herself known for her anti-US stance, had to apologise to the US Government. Meanwhile, intelligence reports began to pour in that the rebels were in a position to control several remote rural areas.

On March 17, the government declared a state of emergency, stationed troops at several key points, and imposed a strict censorship on news. Mrs.Bandaranaike went on the air the same day. She said,

> "As most of you are aware, there has been for some time now a movement being organised by various parties in a secret and clandestine manner with the avowed intention of bringing about a so-called liberation of the people and of this country. The government has been aware of this movement, to which

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various names such as the "Che Guevera movement" have been given and has tolerated its existence, because as a democratic government we are prepared to permit those holding views contrary to us to disseminate those views and participate in the normal democratic process. However, we have received and are receiving information that a small minority of our population have banded themselves together in secret cells, and are making preparations to cause bloodshed and chaos in the country. The Government is also aware that those belonging to this movement have been manufacturing as well as collecting arms, ammunition and other deadly weapons such as hand bombs in order to create chaos and confusion in the country and try to capture power, if possible in the ensuing situation.

It would appear that the aim of this group of people is to bring about what they call "socialism" by means of violence and bloodshed. **This country has been the repository of the Buddha Dhamma for over 2,000 years and its culture and ways of living have been shaped by the doctrines of kindness compassion and humanity preached by the Buddha...It (my government) will not tolerate any group of people who, sheltering under the freedoms granted by democracy and taking advantage of these freedoms, attempt to destroy by violence the very foundations of democracy".**

Mrs.Bandaranaike's protestations about the Buddhist doctrines of kindness, compassion and humanity notwithstanding what followed was an un-Buddhistic, indiscriminate massacre, inhuman torture and mass arrests of thousands of Sinhalese youths. The army and police were given sweeping powers, and on March 21, death penalty was authorised under emergency regulations for arson, looting, trespass and damage by explosives. This order came in the wake of a discovery of a large cache of arms in the campus of the Peradeniya University in central Ceylon.

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Although Mrs.Bandaranaike announced in a broadcast on March 23 that the army was in full control of the situation, that 3,000 insurgents were in custody, and that an amnesty was being offered to the rebels, subsequent events belied these claims. JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera was among those arrested but the rebellion was far from being crushed. Kegalle, one of the main strongholds of the JVP was the scene of bitter fighting. When the army unleashed a reign of terror in the area thousands of rebels were suspected to have melted into virtually inaccessible hideouts in jungles and hilly country. Col. Cyril Ranatunge, who in later years rose to the top of the military ladder, eventually ending up as the country's High Commissioner in Australia, was to earn the unflattering epithet of "The Butcher of Kegalle", for the ruthlessness with which he went about his task.

On April 5, JVP cadres who had eluded the army dragnet tried to stage, with disastrous results what their leader Wijeweera had theoretically expounded as the "One Day Revolution". Lacking direction, but enthused with the idea of a follow-through to the finish, they attacked several police stations simultaneously, forcing the police to abandon them. They cut power lines and telephone communications, forcibly took over State-owned buses, felled trees across roads, and damaged culverts. A plan to kidnap the Prime Minister the same day was however abandoned. In a broadcast Radio Ceylon said later that according to confessions made by three arrested insurgents involved in the plot, fifty of them armed with hand grenades were to have kidnapped the Prime Minister at her home in Colombo and taken her away, dead or alive, in a jeep. But due to faulty communication, only a few of them had turned up and the plan was called off.

Alarmed by the magnitude of the rebel threat, the Government sent "SOS" messages to various capitals in the world, requesting military supplies to help quell the rebellion. On April 6, the JVP was banned, and an island-wide dusk to dawn curfew was imposed. Universities and schools were ordered to be closed. All Governments whose help was sought responded with alacrity, and within the next two or three weeks, the insurgency was brutally crushed,

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the worst army excesses having occurred during this period. In the course of a long broadcast on April 23, Mrs.Bandaranaike said,

> "On April 5, the Government was militarily unprepared for the concentrated armed attack that the **terrorists** launched . You are aware that as a country we were and are firmly committed to a policy of non-alignment in international affairs and have no fears of external aggression. Internally, the police and our armed services are equipped to deal with basic security, and to act to restore order in instances such as cases of riot and sporadic outbursts of civil commotion. We were not geared with the men and equipment to handle situations of such organised thoroughness and surprise in execution as the attacks launched by these insurgents....Therefore, on April 5, we found that we had inadequate weapons, ammunition and aircraft to meet a sustained threat over a long period of time by these insurgent terrorists. Therefore, we needed to make urgent purchases of military equipment. I should like in this connection to express my gratitude and thanks to the Governments of India, Britain, the USA, USSR, the United Arab Republic, Pakistan and Yugoslavia for the speed with which they came to our assistance.... I wish to state here that no foreign military personnel are being used to combat insurgent activity. This is entirely an internal matter for the Government and people of our country".

A surprising development during this period was the expulsion of the North Korean mission from the country. On April 13, the North Korean ambassador and his staff were asked to wind up their affairs and leave the country , which they did by Aeroflot a few days later. A government communiqué said that it did not imply disruption of diplomatic relations between the two countries. It would be remembered that it was Mrs.Bandaranaike who had extended diplomatic recognition to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea for the first time in July 1970, shortly after she assumed power. Although no official

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reason was given for the expulsion, it was believed that police intelligence had evidence that the JVP had benefited both by financial and ideological direction from the embassy.

Pockets of resistance continued even during the amnesty period in early May, with several police stations and buildings being attacked and torched in places such as Kekirawa, Habarana and Polonnaruwa. Reports also came in that groups of hardcore insurgents were holding out in the Singharaja forest covering parts of the Central, Southern and Sabaragamuwa provinces.

The backbone of the resistance having been already broken, Mrs.Bandaranaike had to sit back and take stock of the damage the country had sustained through the insurgency, as well as the cost to the government in putting it down. She was particularly sensitive over the heavy loss of (Sinhalese) lives that the anti-insurgency operations had brought about. Speaking defensively, if not quite truthfully, in a lengthy statement she made in parliament on July 20, she said,

> "The House is aware that wild rumours have been circulating, some no doubt with malicious intent in order to tarnish the good name of the government, that several thousand people were being killed by the armed services and the police....These reports appeared in some foreign newspapers as well.... Therefore, it is my duty to give you some idea, as far as is possible, of the number of casualties which have been the result of this whole episode. **In my estimation which is based on the information available to me, the total deaths do not exceed 1,200. These figures include police and service casualties, those terrorists killed in action and in combing-out operations by the security services, and those killed by the terrorists themselves for various reasons, such as giving information to the police etc".**

In a clever attempt to cover herself, she further said,

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> "I do not claim that these figures are absolutely correct. Hon. Members will appreciate that **obtaining accurate figures in a situation where there has been fighting going on in various parts of practically the whole of Ceylon, is by no means an easy matter**".

She said that the total number of insurgents in custody at that point of time was about 14,000. As for the total damage caused by the insurrection, preliminary reports indicated damage to the extent of Rs.10 million, but taking into account damage to all property, both public and private, and also counting lost production, the sum total seemed to be in the order of Rs.100 million.

A prominent Buddhist monk Walpola Rahula, had reportedly written later, as quoted by American author William McGowan,

> "Thousands of young men and women were arrested, tortured, mutilated, shot, and even burned alive. Dead bodies, some decapitated, floated down rivers. Girls were stripped naked, raped, tortured or killed. Hundreds of bhikkus were arrested and humiliated, tortured or killed – atrocities and cruelties not heard of since the time of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century". *(William McGowan – ONLY MAN IS VILE: THE TRAGEDY OF SRI LANKA, Page 208, Picador, Pan Books Ltd. 1993, London SW10 9PG)*

There was one glaring incident involving army brutality that received much publicity and caused much revulsion. That was the murder of a young woman known as the "Kataragama Beauty Queen". Pemawathie Manamperi - the daughter of a Game Guard in the Department of Wild Life Conservation, was the eldest in a family of ten children. She was crowned "*Avurudu Kumari*" at the village beauty pageant held in connection with the Sinhalese New Year celebrations. A little excitement for the poor girl it might have been, but Fate was to extract a heavy price from her soon after.

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Game Ranger E.Desmond White, who had known the Manamperi family and was an eye witness to the murder was to recount the incident several years later. The villain of the incident was an army officer named Lt.Wijesuriya. Desmond White writes,

> I met Lt.Wijesuriya, machine gun in hand, herding Pemawathie outside. I moved aside and they both walked past me to the compound where the officer went up to a jeep parked nearby and cocked his leg on the buffer of the vehicle. He had his rifle pointed towards Pemawathie whose back was towards me. The two faced each other within view of the civilian drivers of the commandeered vehicles, a few government servants including my staff and other soldiers and a few curious loiterers. The other spectators included a visiting army officer and his staff who had brought mails, who later on gave evidence in this connection.
>
> Lt. Wijesuriya now started abusing Pemawathie for having taken part in insurgent activities and I felt that his speech was mainly for the benefit of the onlookers. Next he ordered Pemawathie to remove her clothes and when she hesitated he made as if to hit her with his gun, whereupon the girl removed her frock over her head and dropped it on the ground as ordered. She was left with a brown coloured brassiere and a black skirt.
>
> Lt. Wijesuriya then ordered her to remove her brassiere which she didn't do at first but under threat of the gun slowly and unwillingly unfastened her brassiere and dropped it at her feet as ordered. Finally the girl was ordered to remove her skirt too. Again she did nothing and I heard her mumble some words to Lt. Wijesuriya to which he replied, "What are you waiting for, remove the rest". When there was still no response, he rushed up to her and again very nearly hit her with the butt of his gun whereupon the helpless girl took off her skirt as well and dropped it at her

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feet as ordered. She was now stark naked and used her hands to cover up her nakedness, while hanging her head in shame. The poor girl was now ordered to walk up to the main road and she slowly moved towards it.

Thereafter, walking as in a trance, I could see her cross the main road and move in the direction of Tissamaharama closely followed by Lt. Wijesuriya who had his machine gun pointed at her back. Behind them went two other soldiers with rifles in hand. They hadn't gone far when the stillness was punctuated by a burst of five or six gun shots and I saw Pemawathie pitch forward and fall on her face. I sensed what happened and thoroughly disgusted at what I witnessed, I quickly walked back inside the building.

A few moments later a soldier rushed up and in hushed tones informed Lt. Wijesuriya that the girl was not dead as yet. Summoning a soldier referred to as Sgt. Ratnayake, he ordered him to "finish the job" and a few moments later we heard the crack of a rifle shot and presumed the ordeal was over. Lt. Wijesuriya then walked to front of the building and hailed a man walking along the road and ordered him to engage some labourers and bury the girl he thought dead. Many minutes passed, mostly in silence, before Lt .Wijesuriya was once again informed by a dejected-looking soldier that the girl was still alive. At this Lt. Wijesuriya seemed annoyed and in loud tones ordered any of the soldiers present to "finish the job". After a while another rifle shot rang out and I prayed the tragedy had ended. I was utterly disgusted at these events but had not voiced my feelings as the Army seemed all powerful at that time. *(The Island, Sunday, Colombo, May 2, 1999)*

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According to Mr.White (one of the few Dutch Burghers in government service at that time, most others having emigrated to Australia after the passage of the "Sinhala Only Act") the brutal manner in which Pemawathie Manamperi was shot and killed continued to be the talk of the town for several weeks. Mr.White had happened to relate his eye witness account to the District Medical Officer (DMO) of that area, a Tamil doctor named Nadarajah who happened to be his friend. It was Dr. Nadarajah who took up the matter with the army commander of the area, Col.Nugawela, who then initiated judicial proceedings. After a Supreme Court trial where the evidence of several witnesses were recorded, Lt. Wijesuriya and Sgt. Ratnayake were each sentenced to 16 years rigorous imprisonment. It was later reported that Lt.Wijesuriya had died in prison while serving the sentence and that Sgt. Ratnayake was murdered after his release from prison.

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# Chapter 13

## 1972-1976: Stormy years of nascent Tamil Nationalism

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# 1972-1976: Stormy years of nascent Tamil Nationalism

If 1971 was the year of the Sinhala youth insurgency, 1972 saw the birth of the Tamil Tiger movement. 1972 also saw the promulgation of the Republican Constitution which while turning the country into a virtual Sinhala-Buddhist state effectively alienated the Tamil people from the body politic. In fact, that year saw several parallel developments taking place one after another -- the walk-out by most of the elected Tamil representatives from the meeting of the Constituent Assembly on 22 May, which was summoned to pass the new constitution; - the formation of the Tamil United Front, with the Tamil Congress and the Ceylon Workers Congress linking hands with the Federal Party; Mr.Chelvanayakam's resignation from Parliament , and his political journey to Tamil Nadu in the company of A.Amirthalingam, - the FP leader's first such visit. The next year was to see another flagrant act of discrimination against Tamils – the policy of "standardisation" in education which shut out many qualified Tamil students from entering the university. Commenting on this, Professor C.R.de Silva, himself a Sinhalese, wrote,

> "The damage already done by discriminatory measures against the minorities is considerable....unlike the Roman Catholics whose religion was the only factor which distinguished them from the rest of the Sinhalese (or Tamils), the Tamils of Sri Lanka have developed feelings of nationalism on their own and the question of educational opportunity only aggravated the conflicts that had risen owing to questions of language and employment. Nevertheless, the question of University

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admissions is clearly one which mobilized the youth in Jaffna and prodded the Tamil United Front leadership to declare in favour of a separate state". *(Quoted by Satchi Ponnambalam, SRI LANKA: The National Question and the Tamil Liberation Struggle, The Tamil Information Centre , 11, Beulah Road, Thornton Heath Surrey, Zed Books Ltd. 1983)*

Tamil youth disenchantment with Federal Party politics had begun to make itself felt even by the mid-sixties, with the youth front of the party egging on their elders towards more confrontational politics. The heavy-handed manner in which Mrs.Bandaranaike's government put down the Tamil satyagraha and civil disobedience movement of 1961, and the subsequent presence in the north and east of what seemed an army of occupation, resulted in angering a growing section of Tamil youths. The Gandhian way of non-violent resistance held no charms for them anymore. The growth of Tamil nationalism, it must be said, was not only long in coming, but was also largely reactive; a rebound from the blatantly discriminative policies of Mrs.Bandaranaike during the two terms she held office. Her harsh enforcement of the "Sinhala Only" Act during her first term resulted in thousands of Tamil clerical employees called upon to qualify in the Sinhala language. They were the ones who provided the backbone of Jaffna's middle class economy, the "postal order economy" as was disparagingly referred to. These men came to Colombo for their living, housed themselves in rooms and "chummeries" (a unique invention of the Jaffna man, both the word and the concept!) leaving their families in Jaffna and Batticaloa. Home for them was where the heart was!

Chelliah Kodeeswaran, the President of the *Arasanka Ezluthu Vinayar Sangam,* a senior officer in the Executive Grade of the Clerical Service, and who was to challenge the Official Language Act all the way up to the Privy Council in London, Kasi Ananthan from Batticaloa, the fiery poet of Tamil nationalism, men like K.Sivanandasundaram, (who was later to be killed by the EPRLF during the Indian army occupation in 1987), R.Balasubramaniam, Adiapatham and Rasarathinam (who ended his life in Madras) were among

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those who quit government service for public life.

> A.Rasarathinam was indeed a tragic figure. Deeply sunk in the Tamil cause, he led a hard life and died a virtual pauper and a victim of bronchial asthma at the age of 49, leaving his wife, his five children and a few devoted friends to mourn his loss. He authored a book titled "The history of Thamiraparani", a scholarly historical work which remained unpublished. It was brought out after his death by an anonymous donor. Although poorly printed at "Vanniyasingham Achchagam" at 11, Montieth Layout, Egmore, Madras-8 and published by "Chelvanayakam Publications", it contains some faded historic photographs as well. There is one of the first "cyanide hero" Sivakumaran, a reproduction of a London Guardian photograph showing Tamil protesters lying on the cricket pitch at the Oval and disrupting play between Sri Lanka and Australia in June 1975. There is also one showing the body of Rasarathinam stretched on the bench at the General Hospital, Madras. The caption of that photograph says the body was flown to Ceylon on 19th July, 1975, where it was received by Kovai Mahesan, Editor of Suthanthiran, M.Sivasithamparam and others. **The name Rasarathinam came to public notice several years after his death in another connection. It was believed that Dhanu, the alleged human bomb assassin who killed Rajiv Gandhi was his daughter.**

Although the idea of using extra-parliamentary means and violence to achieve the goal of separation took root in the minds of youths by end-sixties, the need for an independent Tamil state was never at any time away from Tamil consciousness; except that it never found purposeful articulation. There was of course the whimsical one-man effort of the independent M.P. for Vavuniya, C.Suntharalingam, who moved an amendment to the Speech from the Throne on 24 June, 1956. He wanted (in his words) "*the formation*

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*of a separate, independent state of Thamil Ilankai, comprising Tamil-speaking peoples in Ceylon, within the Commonwealth".* That was not only ruled out of order by the Speaker, but also failed to make an impression on the Tamil people. Much later, the Federal Party theoretician and M.P. for Kayts, V.Navaratnam did make a forceful claim for Tamil self-rule, but found himself one step ahead of his own party and paid the price for it !

The first sparks of anti-State revolt came from a student organisation – the "Marnavar Peravai" (Tamil Students' Federation) founded in 1970, by Ponnudurai Sathiaseelan, which later grew into a militant youth body. Meanwhile, "Kuttimani" (Selvarajah Yogachandran) and "Thangadurai" (Nadarajah Thangavelu) and a few others had formed an informal group called the Tamil Liberation Organisation (TLO) with the avowed purpose of arming themselves. **Two young men who were to figure prominently in Tamil militancy at that time were Sivakumaran of Urumpirai, a daring loner at the age of seventeen, who when trapped by the police bit into a cyanide capsule and died a hero's death in June 1974; and the other of course was Velupillai Pirabakaran who dropped out of school to become eventually the adored Messiah of a Tamil nation.**

Pirabakaran was barely eighteen when he founded the Tiger movement in 1972, what was then called the *"Tamil New Tigers*". The choice of the Tiger motif as a symbol of Tamil resistance was not entirely a new idea. Harking back to the glories of the Chola empire, it had remained ingrained in the Tamil consciousness. The "Tamil New Tigers" was in fact a take-off from a secret underground organisation called ***"Pulipadai***", formed by a handful of men in the early sixties, but had withered away once the Federal Party offered support to the Dudley Senanayake government in 1965. It needed a man like Pirabakaran with his single-mindedness and organisational skill to raise the Tiger symbol to a position where it became an international byword. Four years later, on the 5th May, 1976 he renamed the organisation as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Born on the 26th November, 1954, the young Pirabakaran was sixteen when he began active involvement in Tamil

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militancy. Fondly called "Thamby" (younger brother) by his seniors, it was clear even at that age that he had a talent for organisation, and an unerring instinct for survival that was to stand him in good stead during his later stormy years as the leader of a nation of people. Proclaimed as a wanted man at the age of 20, he had eluded the long arm of armies and governments through decades of sub-continental history.

The years 1972 to 1977 saw a big leap forward not only in Tamil thinking, but also in the political posturing of the Federal Party. The "little now, more later" way of trying to win concessions from Sinhalese governments had proved self-defeating. The unbridled hostility from the new government and the increasing scorn from the Tamil youth were to propel the party towards greater momentum. While Mrs.Bandaranaike adopted a policy of creating and propping up a few "yes men" and self-seekers as alternate Tamil leaders – the Alfred Durayappahs, the Thiagarajahs, the Kumarasuriyars and the Arulambalams, the Tamil voters were themselves getting disenchanted with the Federal Party. The results of the May 1970 elections showed how the party's dalliance with the UNP government during the previous five years had cost it dear. The party strength in parliament was reduced from 14 to 13 and its percentage of votes dropped to 4.96 – the lowest ever. Tired of dealing with the Sinhala south, the FP leaders – for the first time – looked northwards towards Tamil Nadu. On 20 February 1972, Chelvanayakam and Amirthalingam arrived in Madras and had meetings with Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M.Karunanidhi, M.G.Ramachandran (MGR) then Treasurer of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and "Periyar" E.V.Ramaswami Naicker. On 14 May the three main Tamil parties, the FP, the Tamil Congress and the Ceylon Workers' Congress(CWC), along with the various Tamil youth groups got together at Trincomalee and formed the Tamil United Front (TUF)

On 3rd October 1972, Chelvanayakam announced his decision to resign his Kankesanturai seat and re-contest it on the issue of the 1972 constitution. Speaking at the National State Assembly, he said,

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> "The decision will be that of the Tamil people. My policy will be that in the view of the events that have taken place, the Tamil people of Ceylon should have the right to determine their future whether they are to be a subject race in Ceylon or they are to be a free people. .....Let the government contest me on that position. If I lose, I give up my policy. If the government loses, let it not say that the Tamil people support its policy and its constitution."

This then was the first formal claim for the right of self-determination for the Tamil people made by a Tamil leader, a claim that was to remain disputed by Sinhala opinion even twenty years later. The response of the Srimavo Bandaranaike government was to ignore Chelvanayakam's resignation altogether. No by-election was held and the Kankesanturai seat remained unrepresented for more than two years. The by-election was eventually held on 6 February 1975. A communist of the Moscow wing, V.Ponnambalam was pitted against Chelvanayakam in the hope that he would be a worthy opponent, but he managed only 9,457 votes as against the FP leader's 25,927 votes. It was a crushing majority of 16,000 for Chelvanayakam . Speaking after his victory, his biggest ever, he said,

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

Between 1972 and 1975 however, many more significant developments had taken place. In the face of the virtual entrenchment of Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism in the 1972 constitution, Tamils of all shades of opinion (barring a tiny Tamil component of the old Left) found the need to close ranks. Leader of the plantation Tamils Sauviamoorthy Thondaman had not only denounced the new constitution, but also hailed Chelvanayakam in glowing terms as the

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elder statesman of the Tamils. Speaking in Tamil at a reception in Jaffna soon after Chelvanayakam's resignation, Thondaman said,

> "The upcountry (Tamils) have now realized that all Tamils in this country should come together under one leadership. Mr.Chelvanayakam today is therefore the Tamil community and the Tamil community is Chelvanayakam. Our (the CWC's) congratulations to Mr.Chelvanayakam therefore mean congratulations to the Tamil community". *(Ceylon Daily News, 11 Oct.1972)*

Mr.Chelvanayakam himself began to reflect the mood of the Tamil youths when he said in his resignation speech:-

> In view of the events that have taken place, the Tamil people of Ceylon should have the right to determine their future, whether they are to be a subject race in Ceylon or they are to be a free people. *(Federal Party Silver Jubilee volume, December 1974).*

At the 12th annual convention of the party held at Mallakam on 9 September 1973, the following resolution was passed:-

> 'The Tamil-speaking people in Ceylon are in every way qualified to be regarded as a separate nation by virtue of their language, culture, history territory and the innate and intense desire to live as a separate nation, and that the only path for them.....is the establishment of the right to self-rule in their legitimate homeland based on the internationally recognized principle of the right to self-determination of every nation.' *(Ibid)*

It was during this mood of Tamil national fervour that the Fourth International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies came to be held in Sri Lanka. The first Conference was held in the Malaysian capital of Kuala

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Lumpur in April 1966, the second in Madras in 1968, and the third (a low profile one) in Paris in France in 1970. These conferences held under the auspices of the International Association of Tamil Research (IATR) stirred the popular imagination of Tamils everywhere. They brought Tamil scholars from all over the world, without any sectarian differences, under one roof. Research papers on such varied aspects of Tamil life, as Tamil language, Literature, Linguistics, Culture, Society, Art and Antiquity were submitted at these conferences and subsequently published. The "founding father" of the IATR and the man who gave life to these conferences was that eminent Tamil scholar-priest and Tamil nationalist Professor Xavier S.Thani Nayagam.

From the time he launched the quarterly publication *Tamil Culture* in 1952, Fr.Thani Nayagam had been assiduously working towards the idea of bringing together Tamil scholars all over the world with a view to promoting Tamil studies. It was his conviction that it would be appropriate to hold the first such conference in Tamil Nadu in India. But however hard he tried, he found that none of the universities or scholars in Tamil Nadu showed enough strength of resolve to host such a conference. The presence of a Tamilian Cabinet minister (C.Subramaniam) in New Delhi did not help either. **Ultimately, as in many other matters, cultural or otherwise, it had to be an Eelam Tamil to demonstrate leadership skills**! As Head of Indian Studies at the University of Malaya, Fr.Thani Nayagam made the Kuala Lumpur Conference a great model to follow. Prime Minister of Malaysia Tunku Abdul Rahman himself delivered the ceremonial opening address and a Tamil cabinet minister of the government, V.T.Sambanthan was chairman of the organizing committee. What India and Tamil Nadu could not do, Malaysia was able to achieve. Among leading scholars from twenty two countries who participated at the conference was Prof. Jean Filliozat, Director, Ecole francaise d'extreme Orient, Paris, and President of IATR, who was a tower of strength in the running of the conferences.

It was unfortunate for the Tamil people in Sri Lanka that unlike in Malaysia, here was a Prime Minister, Mrs.Bandaranaike, who was already

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busy snipping off all cultural links with Tamil Nadu by banning the import of Indian Films, Indian books and magazines, and making Tamil pilgrim travel to India virtually impossible. The IATR announcement of holding an international Tamil conference in Sri Lanka was certainly unwelcome news to her, but at the same time the Sri Lankan government could not be seen as opposing it. Mrs.Bandaranaike's strategy was to contain any euphoria that the conference could evoke; to that purpose, she offered the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH) in Colombo as the venue for the conference, and whatever other assistance that was needed. But this was summarily rejected by the conveners who insisted that it was but logical that a conference involving Tamil studies be held in a Tamil milieu among a Tamil-speaking population. The Srimavo Bandaranaike government showed its small-mindedness by delaying visas to several international scholars until three days before the conference and refusing visas to some Tamil activists from India. While on the one hand the government openly adopted a hostile position, the behaviour of some of the leading promoters of the Conference did not smooth matters either.

*(This writer was a witness to some unpleasant happenings both at "Shantham" at Milagiriya Avenue, Bambalapitiya, where the IATR had an office and at Saraswathy Hall where one leading member of the organizing committee removed his sandals and threatened to slap another. I was so pained by these happenings that I sent an article to the Ceylon Daily News which while giving the history of IATR, also deplored the bad blood that was emerging among the very people who should be handling the conference. I also made a plea that the conference which involved international scholars be kept free from the country's politics. I was only echoing the private thoughts of Fr.Thani Nayagam and K.C.Thangarajah, both key figures in the organization. Editor Mervyn de Silva who had a sharp journalistic mind went the whole hog with the article. He announced it on Day One, broke what was meant to be one article into two and carried it over two successive issues of the paper! The net result was that even friends of this writer such as James T.Rutnam and Punitham Tiruchelvam who were already in a state*

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*of tension over happenings during the previous weeks felt clearly irritated. Although I was given bad looks both during the train journey to Jaffna and at the inaugural ceremony at Veerasingham Hall, the air was soon cleared with Mrs.Tiruchelvam leading me to a front seat with the remark in mock anger: "Our critics need to be given good seats"! )*

The Conference, attended by Tamil scholars from many parts of the world was held at Veerasingham Hall, Jaffna from 3 to 10 January 1974. The entire Jaffna town wore a festive air during that week. In a country where the Tamil language was denied any official recognition, and where the Tamil people were themselves groaning under State oppression, what was undoubtedly the greatest international conference held in Jaffna was marred by tragedy on the final day. If the government in Colombo was antagonistic, the authorities in Jaffna were no less. Jaffna had a mayor in Alfred Durayappa, a Tamil himself but who was a henchman of the government, whose initial reluctance to permit the use of the open air theatre angered the people. Jaffna also had a Sinhalese-dominated police force that was already earning the hatred of the people. What should have been a grand finale to the conference ended in scenes of bedlam and tragedy. It was an unprecedented crowd estimated at over 50,000 never before seen in Jaffna, that had gathered at the esplanade opposite the hall. It was a sea of heads as one could see, reaching up to the moat of the Dutch Fort in the background. A temporary platform was quickly set up in front of the hall, and loud speakers were fixed to electric posts in the vicinity. By the time the proceedings began it was 8 p.m. Professor Dr.S.Vidyananthan of the University chairing the meeting invited Dr.Naina Mohamed, a distinguished Tamil scholar from India to speak, and it was while the latter was on his feet that a tragic sequence of events began.

In the words of an unofficial Commission of Inquiry set up by Jaffna Citizens,

> Whilst he was speaking, there was some disturbance amongst the crowd on the Regal Theatre side, that is in the direction of

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the Jaffna police station. The evidence is that those at that end stood up and began to move. Dr.Naina Mohamed told them to be calm. Just then a jeep and a truck with policemen armed and in steel helmets endeavoured to make way through the crowd. The truck proceeded forward slowly until owing to the density of the crowd it could go no further. The policemen got off the vehicles and proceeded to hit everyone who stood in their path; then fanning out, they made a sustained and relentless attack on the people who fled in all directions. The result was a stampede to escape the police attack, and in the rush people fell over each other and over bicycles, and some jumped into the moat to avoid the assault. Tear gas and gunshots added to the terror. Several were overpowered by the fumes, and Dr.Vidyananthan and Dr.James Rutnam who were on the platform were rendered unconscious. Mr.Rajaratnam, Attorney-at-law and Mr.Pathinathar, a member of the public service, who were by the metal railings saw the electric wire overhead brought down by gun shots. The latter lived to tell his tale and described the agony he went through. He said a tear gas bomb which did not explode was thrown at him by a policeman, who then fired at the electric wire resulting in the burning coil falling on him rendering him unconscious. **This resulted in the death of seven others..** *(The Tragedy of January Tenth, 1974: Report of the Commission of Inquiry consisting of Mr.O.L.De Kretser, former Judge of the Supreme Court of Ceylon, President, Classical Association of Ceylon, Chairman, Rt.Rev.Sabapathy Kulandran, former Bishop and Mr.V.Manicavasagar, former Judge of the Supreme Court of Ceylon, Members. A.V.Vatepillai, Secretary to the Commission. Jaffna 18th February, 1974).*

Events were beginning to move rapidly thereafter. Youth violence was met with police crackdown and a wave of arrests leading in turn to popular unrest. Some of the activists like Kuttimani and Sathyaseelan were already

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behind bars. Policemen and pro-government politicians became targets of attack. Banks were robbed to fund armed militancy. On June 5, 1974, young Sivakumaran swallowed cyanide and died when surrounded by police. His was to be the first of many such cyanide deaths. He was given a hero's funeral accompanied by an outpouring of popular emotion. Prime Minister Mrs.Bandaranaike who with no expense to the government converted Parameshwara College, a secondary school founded by Sir.P.Ramanathan, into a university campus, thought she was gifting Jaffna with a university and sallied forth for the opening ceremony. A new wave of violence greeted her visit. Bombs were thrown at a police jeep and in Jaffna town and an attempt was made on the life of Alfred Durayappa who organized the Prime Minister's visit.

A defiant Durayappa was however to meet his fate the following year. On July 27, 1975, a Catholic as he was, he went to the Varadaraja Perumal temple at Ponnalai as was his habit, but unknown to him, four youths, one of whom was Pirabakaran were waiting for him. Even as he got off his car, one of them opened fire and shot him at point blank range. Leaving him dead, all four escaped in the very car in which he had come. That was the first political assassination in the history of Tamil militancy and the precursor of many such political assassinations that were to follow during the next twenty odd years. It was the beginning of a new explosive phase in Tamil militancy. At the age of 21, Velupillai Pirabakaran had formally marked his arrival. He followed it up by leading a raid on the People's Bank at Puttur on March 5, 1976, and escaping with half a million rupees. On May 5, 1976, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was born, reconstituted from its earlier name "Tamil New Tigers". Interestingly enough, the Tamil political elders, chasing behind events, made "liberation" their credo as well. What was known as the Tamil United Front (TUF) became the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). Meeting at Pannakam, the birthplace of Appapillai Amirthalingam in the Vaddukoddai constitutency , they passed what was believed to be the historic resolution resolving *"to restore and reconstitute the state of Tamil Eelam*". **Later that year when Chelvanayakam was asked by a journalist how**

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**they hoped to achieve their goal, he was stated to have said: "We would make such a nuisance of ourselves that they (the Sinhalese) would throw us out"!** *(Quoted by A.J.Wilson in his political biography of Chelvanayakam p.129)*

The Vaddukoddai resolution had its sequel in the south. Amirthalingam was hauled up before the High Court in Colombo on a charge of sedition. The accusation was that he possessed and distributed the text of the resolution that called for a separate state. He was of course not the only one to do so, but being a man with an aggressive stance, much of the government hatred turned against him. The High Court upheld the defence objection questioning the validity of the emergency regulations under which he was charged and acquitted him. But the matter did not rest there. The government applied to the Supreme Court for a revision of the order. In a rare gesture of solidarity, G.G.Ponnambalam Q.C. joined two other Queens Counsel, Chelvanayakam and Tiruchelvam in arguing the case before a panel of five judges. If the case against Amirthalingam was politically motivated, the government's sudden decision to withdraw the case appeared to have a cynical political design as well. General elections were due next year, and the SLFP now weakened by the exit of the LSSP and CP from the United Front could need every extraneous support to form the next government!

The LSSP and the CP which had joined forces with Mrs.Bandaranaike's SLFP in 1970 found themselves in a sorry situation within five years. While they prided themselves on the nationalization of the plantations, a policy issue dear to all three parties, the mistake they made was to go along with Mrs.B. for the sake of remaining in office, even on her policy of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism. The chief architect of the Republican constitution of 1972 which not only undermined the concept of secularism but reduced Tamils to second class citizenship, was that renowned Trotskyite and Minister of Constitutional Affairs Dr.Colvin R. de Silva. His political career beginning with the fight against British colonialism in the forties and ending with what was considered by many as the illegally contrived Republican constitution

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of 1972 was a classic example of a "mountain stream ending in mud"! His fellow Trotskyite, the equally renowned Dr.N.M.Perera, who in his capacity as Finance Minister cut the subsidy on rice and increased the price of rationed rice, thereby reducing the urban poor and the estate Tamils to near starvation levels, had also brought his own political career to a muddy end. The LSSP was dismissed from the government in 1975 and the CP defected within two years. In a battle of strength between Right and Left in the United Front government, the Right won, but at the loss of political credibility. It was no surprise that the year 1977 brought in more dramatic changes.

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# Chapter 14

## 1977-1979: Jayewardene at 71 grabs power and breeds more violence.

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# 1977-1979: Jayewardene at 71 grabs power and breeds more violence.

Mrs.Srimavo Bandaranaike who was hailed as the world's first woman Prime Minister when she stepped into her husband's shoes in 1960 could also qualify as Sri Lanka's **worst** Prime Minister at the time she was thrown out of power in 1977. (*Her daughter Chandrika Bandaranaike, also a political widow, was to outdo her many years later).* Besides ruling the country from 1971 under emergency powers and curbing civil liberties, Press freedom and judicial independence all at one go, Madame Bandaranaike also managed to push the Tamil people into the desperate feeling that living in separation was the only answer. But the man who succeeded her proved to be even worse, such was the inability of the Sinhala nation to throw up any leader of probity or wisdom.

Mrs.Bandaranaike, it must be remembered was elected to power in May 1970 for the regular five year term of office, but she extended her term by two more years by means of constitutional jugglery: A provision in the new 1972 constitution- Article 42(5)- said that the parliament "*shall continue for a period of five years* ***commencing*** *from the date of the adoption of the constitution by the Constituent Assembly".* Sinhala historian K.M.De Silva was to comment,

> In taking this action – probably unprecedented in the annals of constitution making in democratic states – the government showed scant regard for any sense of public integrity. *(A History of Sri Lanka, Oxford University Press, 1981, p.546).*

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The general election that took place in July 1977 was however a nightmarish experience for Mrs.Bandaranaike. The UNP under Junius Richard (JR) Jayawardene swept the polls with a resounding, unprecedented victory, winning 140 out of the 168 seats. In attempting to punish Mrs.B for her 7-year misrule, the Sinhalese voters went overboard, reducing the SLFP to a rump of eight, as against the 90 seats the party held at the previous election. The LSSP and the CP which gave up the pursuit of both world revolution and principled politics to consort with Mrs.B were swept out of the parliamentary arena lock, stock and barrel, hammer and sickle! To cap it all, by the biggest quirk of fate, the TULF became the main opposition party with its 18 seats, pitchforking the leader who came on an Eelam mandate into the chair of the Sri Lankan Parliament's Leader of the Opposition, a turn of affairs which fazed the Sinhala voter himself! There was no constitutional compulsion for Appapillai Amirthalingam to accept that post, but the temptation proved too much. The man succumbed, thus causing offence not only to the Tamil voter, but to the Sinhalese voter as well.

To J.R.Jayewardene, the 71-year old beneficiary of this electoral drama, it meant however a long distance run to power. He was after all, independent Ceylon's first Finance Minister. In the first Cabinet headed by the leader of the UNP, Don Stephen (DS) Senanayake, sworn in under the Soulbury Constitution on September 26, 1947, (prior to the effective transfer of power on February 4, 1948,) there were four future Prime Ministers – Dudley Senanayake, Col.J.L.Kotelawala (later knighted as Sir John), S.W.R.D.Bandaranaike AND J.R.Jayewardene. While Dudley Senanayake succeeded his father as Prime Minister at the age of 41, and Sir John took over the mantle 18 months later, and while Bandaranaike rode to power in 1956 at the age of 47, the fourth man, approaching 50, senior to all of them in public life waited. It was a long wait.

JR was the Finance Minister in the D.S.Senanayake cabinet, Finance Minister in the Dudley Senanayake cabinet, and Minister of Agriculture and Food and Leader of the House in Sir John's government. It was a case of

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"*always the best man, but never the bridegroom!*" In 1956, the UNP's run of power was halted, his party routed at the polls, and Jayewardene himself lost his seat at Kelaniya. In March 1960, he found himself back as Finance Minister in the shaky, short-lived UNP government of Dudley Senanayake, but with the defeat of that government the very next month and the emergence in power of Mrs.Sirima Bandaranaike, Jayewardene's political career was checkmated again.

Despite being publicly acknowledged as the man primarily responsible for the resurrection of the UNP after its shattering defeat in 1956, which eventually led to his party regaining power at the March 1965 elections, it was Dudley Senanayake who formed the government with JR his deputy being sworn in as Minister of State, ranking next to the Prime Minister. A consolation prize no doubt, but he was getting on to 59. Came the 1970 elections, and in the swinging mood of electoral moods, a characteristic Sri Lankan phenomenon, Mrs.B. swung back to power. Mrs.B. was then 54, and Prime Minister for the second time. Junius Richard Jayewardene at the age of 64 became Leader of the Opposition.

Despite the fact that he had proved himself to be the sheet anchorman of the party, both in triumph and defeat, JR's disability was that he lacked the charisma and the popular touch that Dudley had, the latter's recurrent stomach problems notwithstanding. JR was feared by most, admired by a few, but it was Dudley whom the Sinhalese people liked and trusted. There was hardly any ruthlessness in Dudley's character, a quality that JR had in ample measure. He was referred to at various times, behind his back, as "Yankee Dick" because of his known proclivity towards Uncle Sam, and as "tricky Dicky", an appellation that fell into disuse after he assumed absolute power.

Power of office, like chicken pox, affects a man more strongly when he gets it late in life. Having been in public life for forty years, and spent 30 years close to the centre of power in the post-independence period, it was idle to expect such a man who finally gets his hands on the levers of power to become

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a lover of a quiet life in politics. If one were asked to epitomise his twelve-year rule in one word, that word would be VIOLENCE! The very induction of his government with its stunning electoral victory was characterised by violence. Apart from getting "pulverized" at the polls, SLFP workers and supporters were also physically pummelled by UNP storm troopers who were intoxicated by their overpowering victory. Curiously, within one month of Jayewardene being installed in power that same flow of violence changed course sharply and metamorphosed into anti-Tamil rioting. More than 300 Tamils were killed, (the official figures given was 100), accompanied by the destruction and looting of Tamil-owned property on a devastating scale. Over one lakh of Tamils were displaced, of whom 50,000 plantation Tamils became permanent refugees in the (then) safety of the North.

Reporting the violence in its issue of September 5, 1977 under the headline – *SRI LANKA: THE BEAST IN MAN, Newsweek said: (Kai Bird with Barry Cane in Hong Kong and Mervyn de Silva in Colombo),*

> "I have seen the beast in man", said one official describing the scene, "I have seen men being burnt alive and women raped and houses set ablaze".

Seven leading British citizens wrote to *The Times*, London (September 20, 1977),

> Race Conflict in Ceylon
>
> From Sir John Foster, Q.C., and others
>
> Sir, A tragedy is taking place in Sri Lanka. The political conflict following on the recent elections is turning into a racial massacre. It is estimated by reliable sources that between 250 and 300 Tamil citizens have lost their lives and over 40,000 made homeless. Limitation on travel is making it hard for correspondents in Sri Lanka to let the world know what is happening.

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The Tamils are a community of over two million who flourished under the British, but have suffered discrimination since. They have now lost confidence in their treatment by the Sinhalese majority and are calling for a restoration of their separate national status, which they had for many centuries before the British came. At the last elections, the Tamil party advocating a separate state gained overwhelming majorities in all Tamil districts. This, no doubt, triggered off the murders, which are said to have been committed either by police acting without orders or with the connivance of the police.

At a time when the West is awake to the evils of racialism, the racial persecution of the Tamils and denial of their human rights should not pass without protest. The British have a special obligation to protest, as these cultivated people were put at the mercy of their neighbours less than thirty years ago by the British government. They need our attention and support.

Yours faithfully,

*John Fostor, David Astor, Robert Birley, Louis Blom-Cooper, James Fawcett, Dingle Foot, Michael Scott.*

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If the 1956 elections could be considered one watershed in the post-independence life of the country, the 1977 elections marked another turning point. Historically speaking, 1977 saw a belated, but significant 21-year old Tamil response to the triumph of Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy of 1956. At a democratically-held, island-wide elections in 1977 (not all elections held since had adhered to democratic values), the Tamil voters in the North and East of the country announced their right to self-determination. The stirring words of the election manifesto of the TULF said, *inter alia,*

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'What is the alternative now left to the nation that has lost its right to its language, rights to its citizenship, rights to its religions, and continues day by day to lose its traditional homeland to Sinhalese colonisation ? What is the alternative now left to a nation that has lost its opportunities to higher education through "standardisation" and its equality in opportunities in the sphere of employment ? What is the alternative to a nation that lies helpless as it is being assaulted, looted and killed by hooligans instigated by the ruling race and by the security forces of the state ? Where else is an alternative to the Tamil nation that gropes in the dark for its identity and finds itself driven into the brink of devastation ?

There is only one alternative and that is to proclaim with the stamp of finality and fortitude that we alone shall rule over our land that our forefathers ruled. Sinhalese imperialism shall quit our Homeland. The Tamil United Liberation Front regards the general election of 1977 as a means of proclaiming to the Sinhalese Government this resolve of the Tamil nation..... Hence the TULF seeks in the general Election the mandate of the Tamil nation to establish an independent, sovereign, secular, socialist state of Tamil Eelam that includes all the geographically contiguous areas that have been the traditional homeland of the Tamil-speaking people in the country'.

In the course of a detailed statement, the manifesto further stated:-

'The Tamil nation must take the decision to establish its sovereignty in its homeland on the basis of its right to self-determination. The only way to announce this decision to the Sinhalese government and to the world is to vote for the Tamil United Liberation Front. **The Tamil-speaking representatives who get elected through these votes, while being members**

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> **of the National State assembly of Ceylon, will also form themselves into the National assembly of Tamil Eelam which will draft a constitution for the state of Tamil Eelam and establish the independence of Tamil Eelam by bringing that constitution into operation either by peaceful means or by direct action or struggle'** *(emphasis mine).*

Words, words, words, as Hamlet would have said, and brave words at that!

In the immediate aftermath of the election results announcement, what gripped the Sinhala public's attention was the shock of the SLFP debacle. The full implications of what happened in the north took time to seep in. The Tamils had voted for separation, which was bad enough. What was worse, a Tamil leading a separatist party was to sit as Leader of the Opposition in their own parliament; a chair that should have legitimately gone to one of the leading Sinhala parties. Their sense of fury at this development was probably one of the reasons that led to the mob attacks on the Tamils. But the mobs, like all irrational mobs turned their anger not on those whom they perceived as their enemy, but on the easily available targets – the upcountry Tamils. The line-rooms of the poor estate workers were set ablaze, making them flee by the thousands. Matale and Kandy were both badly affected. At Matale alone, more than 13,000 were made refugees, and about 7,000 of them sought refuge at the Muthumari Amman temple. Unable to return to their line rooms hundreds of them trekked to the Tamil areas in the north, to Mannar, Vavuniya and Kilinochchi. Humanitarian organisations such as Gandhiyam helped to settle them, at the expense of earning the wrath of the government. It was the government's absolute indifference to the plight of the victimised Tamils that made the Tamil agony worse. Even ten days after the killings began, Jayawardene, then Prime Minister, desisted from declaring a state of emergency on the highly moralistic plea that it would be "contrary to democratic principles"! Lovers of democracy were expected to applaud that !!

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Within seven months of being elected Prime Minister, Jayawardene became a non-elected, all-powerful Executive President through what could be described as constitutional manoeuvring. All that was required was the simple expedient of an amendment to the 1972 republican constitution passed by a two-thirds majority in parliament. Strangely enough, the 1972 constitution, instead of being a document of permanent validity had provided for its own repeal and replacement. On February 4, 1978, Mr.Jayawardene was installed as the first President of the Second Republic. It must be remembered that the TULF, the main representative party of the Tamils, did not participate in the framing of either of the two constitutions. The new constitution came into effect on 7 September 1978.

In discussing the nature of the new constitution and the objectives behind it, Sinhalese political scientist Wiswa Warnapala of the Department of Political Science, University of Peradeniya, commented thus,

> The most important consideration which guided the introduction of the Executive Presidency was the need for a stable executive which could not be dislodged at the whim of an elected legislature, and certain other features of the Executive Presidency therefore showed that the institution had been created to suit the personal ambitions of the present incumbent ....The constitution of 1978 brought into existence a number of changes which devalued the institution of Parliament in the country . President Jayawardene with his own style of party leadership, successfully converted his own party majority in Parliament into a docile group of men who could do nothing except to show absolute loyalty to the leader of the party- who, in this case, is the incumbent President. He went to the extent of obtaining undated letters of resignation from the elected Members of Parliament who constitute the parliamentary group of the United National Party. *(Recent Politics in Sri Lanka: The*

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*Presidential Election and the Referendum of 1982 - W.A.Wiswa Warnapala and L.Dias Hewagama, Navrang, New Delhi, 1983)*

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If the subsequent anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983 led to the war of Tamil liberation, the 1977 rioting led to an upsurge of Tamil acts of terrorism and guerrilla warfare. Banks were robbed; police investigators and political collaborators were identified and gunned down. The attempted assassination of a turncoat Tamil M.P. in the heart of Colombo was the first of many incidents that was to give the government a jolt. M.Canagaratnam, the Second MP for Pottuvil in the Eastern Province, who contested and won his seat on the TULF ticket had crossed over to the government ranks obviously for personal gain. On the night of 27 January, 1978, three unknown youths shot and wounded him as he was walking down Charles Way, Kollupitiya. As he was rushed to hospital, the police cordoned off the area and organised a massive manhunt for the would-be assassins. Two days later the police said they had made a break-through and the names of four wanted persons along with their photographs, were announced through newspapers and wall posters. They were: Uma Maheswaran, Sellappa Nagarasa, Vamathevan alias Thanam, and Pathmanathan alias "Kannady", Rewards of Rs.1 lakh were offered to anyone giving information about any one of them.(Uma Maheswaran parted ways with Pirabakaran later.) According to the MP's valet, three youths, two in long trousers and one in shorts had earlier made inquiries about the MP's residence. The investigating team were obviously not aware of two facts: "Kannady" Pathmanathan was already killed by a rival called "Chetty". **The second fact –Pirabakaran was one of the three youths!** But they got some other vital information from an informant in a chummery in Bambalapitiya who was later suspected to be a decoy. They were told that regular arms training was being held at a jungle base near Madhu Road.

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The investigating team was headed by Inspector T.I.Bastiampillai, who was described as the police department's "expert on insurgent activities in the north and east", but to the Tamil youths he was known as a notorious torturer. On the morning of 7th April 1978, he set forth in his official Peugeot 404 car on what he thought was going to be a successful "Tiger hunt". Accompanying him were Sub-Inspector Perambalam, Sergeant Balasingam and driver Siriwardene. Two days later that the dead bodies of all four were found in a state of decomposition. According to private accounts given by one of the youths who participated in those sensational murders, the police party saw some saronged youths by the roadside. On stopping and inquiring they said they were doing farming in the area. One of the youths who looked friendly enough remarked they appeared tired, which they were really, and said there was a well nearby from where they could quench their thirst. A seasoned investigator as he was, Bastiampillai fell for the trap. He laid his submachine gun aside and scooped his hands and drank as the youth poured the water. Another youth darted quickly, grabbed the SMG, hit him with it and later shot him dead. Perambalam who tried to offer some resistance was similarly gunned down, along with Balasingam and driver Siriwardene. The man who carried out the fatal shootings was Sellakily. He was to become one of Pirabakaran's trusted lieutenants and later lost his life in the Tinnevely ambush of 1983. The government's Defence Ministry which was in a state of agitation over the killings became more alarmed when one month later another police investigator, Inspector Pathmanathan was gunned down in Jaffna.

On May 19, 1978, the government released the names of 38 persons who were said to be on the wanted list by the secret police. Among those named in the list were Velupillai Pirabakaran, Kasi Ananthan, Vannai Ananthan, Thambipillai Santhathiar, Ponnuthurai Sathiyaseelan, Mavai Senathirajah, Selvarasa Yogachandran, Thambithurai Muthucumarasamy and Opposition Leader Amirthalingam's son Kandeepan. On the same day, the National State Assembly passed the bill to proscribe the Liberation Tigers of Tamil

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Eelam and other similar organisations. Then came the biggest shock to the government when on the 7th September an Avro 748 plane exploded at the Ratmalana airport making it a total wreck. A time bomb of suspected foreign origin was believed to have been used. The plane which was Air Ceylon's oldest and only airworthy aircraft had left Jaffna at 7.30 a.m. that day carrying 35 passengers. Having arrived at Ratmalana at 8.20 a.m. the plane was scheduled to fly to Maldives. But for a fortunate catering delay in loading meals for the Maldives flight, the Avro would have been flying over Colombo at the intended time of explosion, causing further human disaster. In December the same year, in a daring daylight robbery, the Nallur branch of the People's Bank was robbed of over a million rupees, and two policemen were shot dead and another critically wounded. It was clear by the end of the year the battle lines were being drawn between the government and a growing band of diehard Tamil youths.

The spirit of violence during the Jayawardene rule was part of a vicious circle; resistance put down with violence; and this in turn breeding counter violence; and counter violence sought to be met with tougher laws. When on the 22nd May, 1978, the government introduced the "Proscribing of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and Other Similar Organisations Law, No.16 of 1978", there was the pathetic belief that a law was a substitute for wisdom. The government limited the period of the proscription for one year. One year later, on the 21st May, 1979, it was found necessary to bring another Bill, amending the earlier Act by substituting in Section 15 the words "two years" in place of "one year".

But when it was discovered by July the same year that the exercise was becoming profitless, it was decided to replace the earlier law proscribing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam by a wider one – the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act. By continually misguiding himself into thinking that if one law does not work, a more tough one will, he believed he was assured of success this time. On July 11, 1979, he appointed his kinsman,

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Brigadier "Bull" Weeratunga, then Chief of Staff of the Sri Lankan army as "overall commander of the security forces in the administrative district of Jaffna", and on July 14 issued the following 'imperial' decree,

> **'It will be your duty to eliminate in accordance with the laws of the land the menace of terrorism in all its forms from the island, and more especially from the Jaffna district. I will place at your disposal all resources of the State. I earnestly request all law-abiding citizens to give their co-operation to you. This task has to be performed by you and completed before the 31st December, 1979'.**

On the same day the Cabinet decided to clamp down a state of emergency in the Jaffna district, and the President invoked provisions of the Public Security Act which gave the police and the armed forces the power to dispose of dead bodies without an inquest. This resulted, as was to be expected, in indiscriminate arrests and torture of Tamil youths, and the disappearance of another three within the first twenty four hours of the expected gazetting of the "disposal of dead bodies without an inquest" order. Unfortunately for the Brigadier, in his urge to dispose of dead bodies without inquests he jumped the gun, and even before the gazetting of the order was notified, the bodies of two Tamil youths, Inbam and Selvam were discovered in the Pannai causeway, badly mutilated and showing evident signs of prolonged torture. The inquests were held and several unsavoury facts came to light. Referring to the reign of army and police terror in Jaffna during this period, Amnesty International in its memorandum to the President (1980) said,

> "Various methods of torture have been used by both the police and the army in the period immediately after the emergency declaration, including suspending people upside down by the toes while placing their head with suffocating fumes of burning chillies, prolonged and severe beatings, insertion of pins in the finger tips and the application of broken chillies and biting ants

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to sensitive parts of the body and threats of execution. After these and other methods of torture had been applied, statements were extracted and recorded".

On the 31st December 1979, Brigadier Weeratunga duly reported to Mr.Jayawardene that as envisaged in the Presidential decree of July 14, his mission was accomplished. As his reward, he was given charge of another mission – as the Sri Lankan High Commissioner in Canada! That Mr.Weeratunga failed in his mission was no longer a debating matter. But it was certainly a moot point whether the President should have chosen to present a Brigadier with a black record as *"quid pro quo"* for the consistent kindness shown his country by an aid-giving liberal democracy, such as Canada! A posting in Pakistan, for example, would not have been thought inappropriate because soldiers of fortune are not unknown in that country!

Jaffna was in an angrier mood by the time the Brigadier left the place and so understandably was Jayawardene because Tamil militancy was gaining a bigger motivation. The vast mass of the Tamil people both within as well as the growing numbers of expatriates outside in India and the west were beginning to accept armed struggle as the only option that remained. This of course left Jayawardene facing a defiance that he had hardly expected from a people who for generations had produced meek, obedient quill drivers in government departments and studious Tamil youths with text books always tucked under their arms and who, when set upon by Sinhalese mobs in the south had offered no resistance whatever and only knew how to run, to the safety of their homeland in the northeast.

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# Chapter 15

## 1981: Jayawardene inaugurates a dark phase in the island's history.

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# 1981: Jayawardene inaugurates a dark phase in the island's history.

Until he gave way to Ranasinghe Premadasa at end-1988, Junius Richard Jayawardene had the dubious distinction of being the Sinhalese politician to have enjoyed the longest spell of power. But within the eleven and a half years of his rule he had also managed to take Sri Lanka to the brink of disaster! More anti-Tamil rioting had taken place within those years than during the previous 30 years of independence. More Tamils had been killed during Jayawardene's first six years in power than during the rule of the six previous governments. More Hindu temples had been destroyed or desecrated under President Jayawardene's Buddhist reign than during the over 100 years of Portuguese religious persecution in the 16th and 17th centuries. His crowning attempt at anti-Tamil cultural genocide was the burning down of the Jaffna Public Library with its 90-odd thousand volumes, some of which were irreplaceable ola manuscripts. It was the State-aided anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983 that brought the country into eternal shame in the eyes of the international community and brought about the Tamil war of liberation that was to last for more than nineteen years! He was the first politician to invite a foreign army into his country that consequently led to human blood baths both in the northeast and in the south. As evidence, all these are damning enough, but how does one explain the collective amnesia of the Sinhalese people who seem to have forgotten that dark phase in their country's history?

On the 3rd April, 1979, during the second year of Jayawardene's rule there took place a debate,( if it be called one), in the parliament of Sri Lanka.

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A senior minister in his cabinet, Cyril Mathew, Minister of Industries and Scientific Affairs, moved a motion condemning the Leader of the Opposition, A.Amirthalingam (the first Tamil to hold that office) and his wife for statements alleged to have been made by both of them while they were on a visit to India. The total absence of reserve and restraint in the language used by Mathew on that particular day and in the country's highest body will surely rank among the worst vulgarisms spoken in any public forum in the world. *(Parliamentary Hansard, Vol.4, No.13, 3rd April 1979).*

On the 23rd and 24th July, 1981, there took place in Jayawardene's parliament an unprecedented bizarre occurrence. The ruling government party decided to move a vote of no-confidence on the Tamil Leader of the Opposition! With the diminutive Opposition consisting of the TULF and the SLFP boycotting the proceedings, it became an all-Government show of verbal pyrotechnics. The motion was nevertheless pressed to a vote, and good it was for the soul of everybody that it was done, because it demonstrated how few of Jayawardene's Members of Parliament could detach themselves from the spirit of rancour and abuse that prevailed in the House those two days. The House divided with 121 MPs voting for the motion, and two declining to vote. It is worth recording for posterity the names of the two who declined. One was the Minister for Rural Industrial Development and leader of the plantation Tamils S.Thondaman, and the other, one of the rare Sinhalese to adorn the House – Deputy Minister of Justice Shelton Ranarajah.

What transpired during the two days of proceedings could best be described as "verbal terrorism". At least two of the Members of Parliament speculated on the possibility of killing the Leader of the Opposition; and even suggested ways and means of how best it could be done! One suggested the traditional punishment meted out to traitors by the Kandyan Sinhalese kings : rope two arecanut trees together, tie his legs to the two trees and cut the rope so that he would be torn into two! Another member came out with a more ingenious idea. He said:-

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**.....Even during the time of the Sinhalese kings the kings of every country, when there was war, they had to fight back. Even King Asoka before he came to that prestigious position of world history, was a person who fought tooth and nail for his country, for his people, and prevented wars. Now Sir, if you take it in that stride, what should we do to this so-called leader of the Tamils? If I were given the power, I would tie him to the nearest concrete post in this building and horse-whip him till I raise him to his wits. Thereafter let anybody do anything he likes – throw him to the Beira (lake) or to the sea, because he will be so mutilated that I do not think there will be life in him.....**

The spirit of violence during the Jayawardene period was sustained, as could be seen, not merely deed but by word and thought. The President did not only intensify and perpetuate violence, but he also institutionalised it. There was an all-pervasive aura of disquiet in the whole island let alone the State terror and insurgent violence in the north-east, there was also the fear of bombs in Colombo. The Sri Lankan mass media, to its eternal shame, was also actively disseminating violence in thought, word and spirit. It could be said without hesitation that in no other country in the world, democracy or otherwise, would have one found language used with such barbarous intent as was in the political columns of the daily Press in Colombo. The fierceness of editorial expression, sometimes bordering on hysteria, along with reader responses which were equally frenzied, (particularly in references to neighbour India) seemed to be a manifestation of a sad decline in moral sensibility; and a grievous blot on Sinhala society which despite occasional violence in the mass, had produced generations of men with refinement, poise, grace and good humour in all professions and in a variety of callings. This writer, who had over a period of more than twenty five years worked in Colombo and associated himself with several men and women of the Sinhala community in the fields of Journalism, Literature, Advertising, Broadcasting, Tourism promotion, was appalled at the shocking degeneration in thinking of

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a growing cross-section of people manning those fields. The tragic events of the succeeding years of 1981 and 1983 should not have come as a surprise, given the "groundwork!" that preceded them.

1981 will ever live in Jaffna's memory as the year when one of the most heinous crimes was perpetrated on the Tamil people – the burning down of the Public Library by a set of Sinhala hoodlums imported into Jaffna by the government. It looked as if there was an unspoken thought on the part of the government: "Jaffna had to be taught a lesson"! Two years later Jayawardene was to give public expression to that thought when he said "*I am not worried about the Jaffna people now. We cannot think of them, not about their lives, or of their opinion about us*" (Interview with Ian Ward of the *Daily Telegraph*, London, July 10, 1983). By March 1981, Tamil rebels had begun to take the law into their hands with increasing ferocity. The logic was clear. If every law since independence from 1948 to 1956 and onwards and every constitution since then was meant to victimise Tamils, there was no moral imperative that Tamils should continue to obey those laws.

On March 25, there took place in Neervely near Point Pedro, the biggest bank robbery ever. A convoy carrying Rs.6.8 million rupees belonging to the People's Bank was ambushed by six youths armed with sub-machine guns. They got away with the cash, but unfortunately in the process gunning down the two Sinhalese police constables who were escorting the bank convoy. The acting Inspector General of Police Rudra Rajasingham and D.I.G. Crimes R.Sunderalingam along with a high-powered team rushed from Colombo and mounted a massive manhunt. A reward of Rs.1 million was announced for any information given in strict confidence, but nothing came out of it. Meanwhile, the government was determined to go through its spurious democratic exercise of holding elections for the District Development Councils (DDCs) for the Jaffna district. The DDC proposals were the brainchild of Professor Jayaratnam Wilson and the electoral contest was one between the TULF and the ruling UNP. It became a matter of prestige for the government to prove the point that the ruling party enjoyed support in the peninsula, and towards

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that end was prepared to throw all State resources into the campaign. Five days after the bank robbery, Minister of Fisheries Festus Perera was sent to Jaffna to select UNP candidates.

The man who was selected to head the UNP list was A.Thiagarajah, a retired Principal of Karainagar Hindu College and a former M.P. for Vaddukoddai. While he was returning from an election meeting on the 24th May, he was killed after being shot at by a lone gunman. He had survived an earlier attempt on his life at his Colombo residence in 1972, but failed to see the writing on the wall. Thiagarajah who jumped from party to party represented the Tamil Congress in Parliament in 1970, but within months he joined the ruling SLFP. He continued in that party until 1977, but contested that year's election as an Independent and lost. He was tipped to be the SLFP nominee at the District Development elections, but when the party decided not to contest the elections, he won nomination from the UNP, such was the unprincipled political behaviour of both the UNP and their turncoat candidate! Ministers Festus Perera and U.B.Wijekoon paid their last respects to the slain politician, and a powerful battery of Ministers headed by Prime Minister Premadasa attended the funeral held under tight security.

Jaffna was soon getting frequent flying visits from government politicians from Colombo. Police muscle in Jaffna was being strengthened, according to Manik de Silva reporting for *The Observer* of May 26. Additional men were sent not only from Colombo but also from Kurunegala and other areas. As to how many of them were policemen or plain thugs remained a matter for conjecture. Appropriately enough, they were housed at the Durayappa Stadium. The National Security Council had also assigned a "support role" to the armed services to ensure "a peaceful DDC polls" on June 4. The Tamil DIG (Northern Range) P.Mahendran was temporarily assigned to Colombo and Edward Goonewardene, DIG (Metropolitan Range) was flown to take charge of Jaffna. Senior Ministers Cyril Mathew and Gamini Dissanayake, along with Minister Mrs.Wimala Kannangara had already taken up positions in a hotel in Jaffna. The omens were certainly not looking good. What followed were two nights of anarchy, arson and terror.

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All what was required for the arsonists to get to work was some provocation somewhere; and that was provided by a stupid Tamil gunman who fired at policemen covering an election meeting of the TULF. The meeting was at the Nachimar Kovil grounds in Vannarponnai. One policeman was killed and three others were injured. The slain policeman again happened to be a Sinhalese, a sergeant called Punchi Banda from Kurunegala. That triggered the horrendous happenings that were to follow. Enraged Sinhalese policemen housed at Durayappa Stadium, some of them in uniform and some in mufti, broke open A.Suppiah & Sons, a liquor shop, and having consumed large quantities of liquor went on a rampage. Obviously they needed Dutch courage to do what they were planning to do. First, they went to the Nachimar Kovil grounds, the venue of the meeting where the shooting took place. Some of them stormed into the temple, damaged religious objects and then tried to set fire to the wooden temple chariot outside. Others entered neighbouring houses, assaulted the inmates and set fire to a number of cars and houses in the vicinity. Worse was to follow.

About forty of them commandeered a bus, and drove to the TULF office at Main Street about four miles away. They shot at the lock, opened it, broke up the doors and windows, piled them up and poured petrol and set fire to the entire building. The entire building was gutted down. Next, they went to the house of the M.P. Yogeswaran, shouted abuse at him and broke open the house. The M.P. and his wife managed to scale the wall behind and escaped, but the house, along with his jeep were set on fire and burnt down. Continuing their drunken spree they threw petrol bombs at a timber depot in the bazaar area and other adjoining shops, making a huge bonfire of the area. Frantic telephone calls by TULF leaders and Government Agent Yogendra Duraiswamy to the powers that be had no effect.

If what happened on the night of May 31 was bad enough, how was one to explain the inaction of the government over the bigger disaster that followed on the night of June 1? On the morning of June 1, the Security Council in Colombo met and discussed the events of the previous night.

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*"The entire strength of the Jaffna police numbering 1000 lower ranks , 20 ASPs in charge of sectors and two DIGs, Messrs. Edward Goonewardene and P.Mahendran were out on the "field" trying to bring the situation under control"*, said a report by Geoff Wijesinghe in the *Observer* of that morning. Government Ministers were at King's House within the Dutch Fort, on the night of the happenings and were certainly aware of what happened. The President himself knew it all. But what was the tone of the speech he made in Colombo the same evening? Here is a report from the *Ceylon Daily News* dated June 2: *"President J.R.Jayewardene told a massive gathering opposite the Tower Hall yesterday evening* (June 1*) that he regretted the senseless acts which a* ***section of the people in the North*** *had been indulging in. He called upon the* ***national*** (author's emphasis) *political parties and their leaders to do their duty by doing what they could to stop the lawless acts in the North spreading ....."I think", said the President, the people who are responsible for the dastardly acts in the north have gone out of their senses. No other citizens should follow their example".* !! In making that speech, President Jayewardene was obviously guilty on three counts – (1). He hid from the Sinhalese listeners and readers in the south the true events that happened in Jaffna the previous night; (2.) As President he should have commiserated with the people of Jaffna over the destruction they suffered, which he failed to do; (3.) **What was most Machiavellian was that he tried to paint the victims themselves as the arsonists!**

With the President himself virtually disowning responsibility for the events of 31st May, what happened the next night was not surprising. Around 9 p.m. on June 1, a huge blaze engulfed the third floor of the Jaffna Public Library. The third floor was the one which contained the reference section with its precious tomes and rare ola manuscripts. Mindless thugs could have been the ones who threw petrol and set the fire, but it was evident that behind it was some mastermind who had studied the layout of the library. Soon the fire spread to the lending section and within hours the entire library with its 97,000 volumes and furniture was gutted down.

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Another set of thugs numbering about fifty had gone to the offices of the *Eelanadu*, one mile away, carrying cans of petrol and heavy implements. They broke open the iron gates of the building, set fire to the machinery, a motorcycle, and several bicycles in the premises. Two employees of the paper fled the scene after sustaining burn injuries. The *Eelanadu* was an independent Tamil daily, Jaffna's only newspaper, founded by K.C.Thangarajah in 1956. The destruction continued. Several shops in the town were burned down, but particular care was taken to give priority to bookshops. Statues of Tamil scholars in the bazaar area were beheaded. It was a carefully planned assault on everything that had cultural value – a vicious attempt at cultural genocide! All these happened while armed forces were present in the town. *The Sun* newspaper on the morning of June 2 had carried a photograph of soldiers from Colombo being airlifted to Jaffna on the 1st. Defence Secretary Col. C.A.Dharmapala, Cabinet Secretary G.V.P.Samarasinghe and Police chief Ana Seneviratne were all in Jaffna that day, not to mention the senior Cabinet Ministers Cyril Mathew and Gamini Dissanayake. Once the dreadful events of two nights came to an end, the government imposed a dusk to dawn curfew in Jaffna, and simultaneously imposed a country-wide press censorship; thereby keeping the country in the dark about the dark doings of their own agents. In the north, M.Sivasithamparam, M.P. and Kumar Ponnambalam issued a joint statement calling for a hartal and Jaffna observed a day of mourning. The government said the proposed DDC elections would be held however, so determined they were to win at least one seat in Tamil territory.

A few days before the elections, senior Tamil polling officers were replaced by government party supporters brought from Colombo. On the morning of the polls, TULF leaders were arrested for no apparent reason but were later released. Several ballot boxes were found missing and were not produced for counting. Later, one of the missing boxes was discovered in a hotel room occupied by a cabinet minister! Despite all these, the TULF won all the seats. Jayawardene's rough experiment with democracy had failed.

During the succeeding months of July and August the scene shifted to the

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south. First came that bizarre occurrence in parliament when government M.Ps stood up to issue death threats against Amirthalingam. The inflammatory speeches made on that occasion – most of them were in Sinhala – were soon printed and distributed widely in the south. These led to new tensions in August, resulting in anti-Tamil rioting in several areas, particularly Ratnapura and Negombo. The victims were mostly Tamils of Indian origin. On August 17, a state of emergency was declared and a government communiqué stated:-

> Within the last ten days, seven deaths by violence,196 incidents of arson, and 35 incidents of looting have been reported by the police....It has also been reported that there has been damage to estates and estate property, particularly in the Ratnapura district.

*The Hindu* reported from Madras in its issue of August 21,

> Several thousand Indian estate workers had to trek through snake-infested jungles and cross high hills to escape persecution by organised armed gangs of hoodlums over the past 15 days, according to eye witness reports. The refugees presented a pitiable sight, dragging their weary feet with children in arms and little bundles of clothes slung over their backs."

An Indian journalist S.Venkat Narayan of *India Today* was detained by the police at Kahawatte and his camera impounded. A few days later, an Indian national from Tamil Nadu, S.Dhanapathi who was a member of a pilgrim party to the Hindu holy shrine of Kathirgamam (Kataragama) in the southeast of the island was axed to death while he was waiting for a shave in a barbershop. On August 21, President Jayawardene imposed a Press censorship.

British journalist Brian Eads who visited Sri Lanka wrote in *The Observer*, London, of 20 September :-

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> ....It is clear that subsequent violence in July and August which was directed against Sri Lankan Tamils in the east and south of the country, and Indian Tamil estate workers in the central region, was not random. **It was stimulated, and in some cases organized by members of the ruling UNP, among them intimates of the President.** In all, 25 people died, scores of women were raped, and thousands made homeless, losing all their meagre belongings. But the summer madness which served the dual purpose of quietening Tamil calls for Eelam, that is, a separate state, and taking the minds of the Sinhalese electorate off a deepening economic crisis is only one of the blemishes on the face of the island. Since Jayawardene came to power four years ago, a system of what his critics call "State Terrorism" has brought an Ulster-style situation in the Tamil-majority areas of the north and east.

President Jayawardene had pre-empted this kind of criticism. Adroitly, he sidestepped, freeing himself of all personal blame by issuing an ecclesiastical censure on his own partymen. Addressing the executive committee of his party on September 4, he poured forth this anguish,

> I speak more in sorrow than in anger. Recent events throughout the island, north, centre and the south, show that the religion we profess does not seem to influence for the good some of our people. I regret that some members of my party made speeches in Parliament and outside that encourage violence and murders, rapes and arson that have been committed....I must have reasons to be proud of the party of which I am the leader. If I cannot, it is better for me to retire from the leadership of the party and let those who believe that the harming of innocent people and property that has happened recently is the way to solve the problems that face this multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-caste society, take over the leadership of the party.

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In fact, there was an urgent need to polish up images and do some political interior decoration, because the Queen was coming. Queen Elizabeth was to be special guest at the government's celebrations to mark 50 years of universal franchise in the island in October. Confident as he probably was that Leader of Opposition Amirthalingam had been sufficiently "softened up" by the barrage of abuse and threats that his partymen launched on him in parliament and outside, he invited him to face-to-face talks, "amity talks" as they were described. The Jayawardene-TULF honeymoon had begun, and like all honeymoons did not last long. Nevertheless, the year 1981 ended on a sober note.

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# Chapter 16

## 1982-83: Adventure in Journalism. The *Saturday Review*, Jaffna

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# 1982-83: Adventure in Journalism. The *Saturday Review*, Jaffna

On January 30, 1982, there was launched in Jaffna, a modest-looking English language weekly; a tabloid of twelve pages. At a time when newspaper printing technology in many parts of the world had moved into the computer age, this was hand composed. Had the 15th century English printer William Caxton lived to see it, he would have thoroughly approved of it. The paper set out to address itself to an English-reading Sri Lankan public which itself was shrinking. Not that the English-conversant public was at any time substantial. At no time during the near 150 years of British colonialism in Ceylon did literacy in the English language approach even a ten percent mark of the population. But despite the passage of the Official Language Act of 1956 which made Sinhala the official language , English continued to be the language of government – the pipeline to power, affluence, prestige and the language of the decision makers. Anyway, it was the language of communication with the outside world. Sri Lankan Tamils themselves were breaking loose from their country's moorings, and, like the Jewish Diaspora of old, were dispersed in varying presences of twos and threes to twenty thousand in at least fifty countries of the world, girdling such unlikely places as Belize in Central America, Lesotho in South Africa, Papua New Guinea in the Far East to the developed countries of the western world.

The paper had to have a neutral-sounding name and was to come out every Saturday and was therefore named *Saturday Review.* As founder-editor of the proposed weekly, I had a free hand in naming the paper, setting out its objectives, fashioning the editorial inputs and determining its policy – fortuitously the kind of freedom that few editors of newspapers, hand-

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composed or otherwise, enjoy under contemporary Third World conditions! The man who breathed life into the venture was K.Kanthasamy. He was an extraordinary human being. He thought precisely, spoke little, ate little, led a Spartan life, and worked like a beaver. We learnt to communicate with each other on a wavelength laced with a dry humour that was his own speciality. He told me: "The finances are my problem. You don't have to worry about it. What you do with the paper is your problem. I won't worry about it." Can any editor ask for anything better ?

The rationale behind the venture was that Tamils in Sri Lanka needed a forum to ventilate their grievances, to express their point of view. It had remained a long felt need. It was felt equally important that the paper should have its physical roots in Tamil soil. That nexus was vital if it was to reflect authentically the heartbeats of the people whose cause it had set out to espouse. Not only the Sinhala, but also the English language Press in metropolitan Colombo had at that time become increasingly intolerant of Tamil opinion. Some of the newspapers were government-owned, some were under the government's thumb. With one notable exception – the Sinhala language Communist Party organ, the *Aththa*, they had all become willing mouthpieces of Sinhala chauvinism. This decadence had begun in the early seventies under the rule of Mrs.Sirimavo Bandaranike. Truth, journalistic independence, ethics and dignity were jettisoned and many newspapermen were quite content in the role of "hacks".

Mercifully, there were pockets of Sinhala opinion which thought straight, tried to reason out, and check the growing divide between the Sinhala and Tamil peoples. But their voices were scarcely heard above the cacophony raised by the mass media. This segment of Sinhala thinking was very much in my mind when I decided that while the primary concern was to articulate the Tamil mind, the proposed weekly should keep its columns open for any expression of Sinhala dissent. This meant that the paper should carry a neutral, non-communal name. The name *Saturday Review* flashed in the mind through the quirky memory of a long-sustained American literary

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magazine by that name, edited by Norman Cousins, who, thirty years earlier had visited Jaffna College, Vaddukoddai during my student days there. I was then editing the college student paper called *The Young Idea.* So that settled it, and with that name the paper had naturally to appear every Saturday. **Well, living dangerously, we could not survive even a hundred Saturdays, before the Government lost its patience, came down with a heavy hand, banned the paper and sealed the editorial office on July 1, 1983. That was three weeks before the holocaust began in Colombo, which was to open a more gruesome chapter in the history of the country.**

When *Saturday Review* was born, the political ferment in the island was already heading towards boiling point. President Jayewardene was in his fifth year in office, presenting the picture of a man firmly seated on a saddle that was constantly heaving , with a tenacious grip on the reins, but with the horse itself galloping in a direction leading dangerously towards a precipice. Jaffna was wearing the scars of the previous year, when the Jayewardene government's rough experiment with democracy in the District Development Council elections ended not only in an electoral fiasco and the disappearance of ballot boxes, but in the burning of the Jaffna Public Library, the peninsula's proudest possession.

While this tragedy was being enacted in Jaffna, I was in Colombo. I had chosen to accept an insipid, but a safe and well-paid job in the Colombo Plan Bureau office at the beginning of 1981, having baled out from the Ceylon Tourist Board in a hurry, where my job as Editor was creative and challenging, where I enjoyed the trust of my official superiors and the co-operation of my colleagues, but the seat on which I sat was getting "hot"! I was the only Tamil holding even a middle rung appointment in that Government Corporation, and an aggressive, communal, government-sponsored trade union, the *Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya* (JSS), was beginning to interfere in the office routine. In my area of publications, I felt myself being looked upon as a security risk. When I heard that a JSS busybody had shot off a protest note to the Chairman questioning the historical reference to a Jaffna kingdom in

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a colour brochure meant for tourists, I smelt trouble. That reference came in the course of a historical outline of the Island. It was historically valid, and anyway it had been there in the earlier brochures. What was issued was only a reprint of the existing publication with changes in visuals. But who bothers about facts during witch-hunts? The Colombo Plan Bureau job provided a timely escape and I "parachuted" out!

The need for an English language newspaper for Tamils was never felt with sharper urgency than when those dreadful incidents occurred in Jaffna. Events that would have made Page 1 lead headlines by any journalistic yardstick were not even reported in the Colombo Press! When the news did percolate through, it only made confusion worse confounded. One highly mischievous version of the burning of the Public Library that circulated among a section of the Sinhalese educated classes in the South is worth recalling. Obviously inspired by some imaginative but irresponsible academic, the story went thus: The Jaffna Public Library had among its volumes the "Paranavitane collection", so the story went, alluding to the valuable private collection of the well-known Sinhala epigraphist-scholar that was earlier put up for sale. Paranavitane had in his writings disputed the existence of a separate Jaffna kingdom , and this the Tamil "Tigers" knew; so they burned down the whole library !Bizarre as it sounds, what was more unbelievable was that this story won credence among some Sinhala academics, including a senior functionary in a high-profile research organisation! Such was the power of the Press blackout and so unwilling was the mental state of even thinking sections in the South to accept the shame of the government's perfidy. When I made inquiries, I realised how the entire superstructure of the rumour was built on the basis of one slim fact – that the Paranavitane collection was indeed in Jaffna, but it was the Jaffna University Library that had negotiated for its purchase.

The *Saturday Review* came out with its first issue on January 30, 1982, which happened to be the 34th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. The day's significance was duly recorded with excerpted portions of the

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book "Freedom at Midnight", while all around us we felt the oppressive spirit of violence. Looked at in one way, the times were hardly auspicious for the launch of a newspaper, and the atmosphere certainly not conducive for free expression. But if the exercise did not seem like a promising venture, it certainly had all the elements of an adventure! That was how we looked at it. We had in fact set up office barely a mile from the Jaffna army headquarters at Gurunagar. Brigadier Cyril Ranatunge, later to climb the highest rung in the army ladder, was in command.

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A personal confession is required at this stage. I had always suffered from a sense of the ridiculous. There was nothing sacred, so I believed, that could not do with a little sacrilege, nothing pompous that could look better than when slipping on a banana peel; and no tragedy that could be seen in better perspective except with a little infusion of the comic. This can sound like a disastrous outlook for a man just handed down an editorship during a period of violence and upheaval. But to launch a paper that anyone could see was destined to go on a collision course with the government of the day, this philosophy had its own cushioning comfort. And so, the inaugural editorial comment began on this flippant note,

> 'There is the story of an editor of a small newspaper in the "Wild West" of America who was one day sitting in his swivel chair sucking his pipe and musing pleasantly of life. Suddenly, a bullet crashed through the window, whizzed past his ear and embedded itself on the wall behind his back. A happy smile lit up the editor's face. "Ah", he said complacently, "I knew that column of ours yesterday was going to be a success…."

And with that initial comment, my own life pattern was set.

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Despite the near-total breakdown of trust between the Sinhala and Tamil peoples, our belief that the SR could yet serve as a bridge between the South and the North, brought an immediate reward in the person of Gamini Navaratne, a Sinhala-Buddhist by birth , who became the paper's Colombo-based Political Correspondent. Gamini was to achieve the unique distinction of being invited to edit the paper itself during the second phase of the paper's existence, beginning February 1984. That was an act that called for confidence, courage and trust on both sides - the publishers of *Saturday Review* to entrust what was after all a paper that was meant to articulate Tamil grievances to a Sinhalese, at a time when Tamils felt most grievously wronged at the hands of the Sinhalese in July 1983, and for a Sinhalese to lift himself from his own physical and mental environment that was seething with hostility against the Tamils, compounded by the animosity within the Colombo media world itself in which he functioned, and to accept that position living as the solitary Sinhala civilian in a militarised zone of the country. Where at the national political level the Sinhala and Tamil leaderships failed the show the way, the *Saturday Review* provided a tangible demonstration.

Years later, in a special issue of the paper he brought out, Gamini Navaratne wrote in a reminiscent vein,

> When it was proposed to launch the *Saturday Review,* I told Mr.Sivanayagam, its founding editor – my colleague in the *Daily Mirror* in 1964 and good friend ever since – that I would give him all the help I could from Colombo . I wrote to him:- "Just because you are there, solely because you are there, I shall do everything possible to keep the *Saturday Review* going…", because I respected him as a journalist, intrepid, innovative, and indefatigable. I added that at any time he wanted my physical presence in Jaffna, I would come over and assist. But I did not bargain for a prolonged stay in Jaffna, which has been my predicament.

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> I last met Mr.Sivanayagam in Sri Lanka on 01 July 1983. As I took his leave under the Temple Tree in front of the office, after enjoying his hospitality for a week, I said I feared that the days of the *Saturday Review* were numbered. There were plenty of persons in the Government who wanted the paper banned; it was becoming a damn nuisance for them. I had just reached my hotel and begun packing my bags when he telephoned to say that my worst fears have been proved correct. By Emergency Regulations, the *Saturday Review* office has been sealed .

It was a Friday that it happened. Ten pages of the next day's issue were printed and ready, but I had to hold back pages 1 and 12 which were to carry a special report on the anti-Tamil violence in Trincomalee in the previous month of June. Overshadowed by July's orgy of violence, the world was never made aware of the June happenings in Trincomalee. Thirty one Tamils were killed, over a hundred injured, some of them grievously; over a dozen Hindu temples, and around 600 houses, shops and business establishments were burned or attacked by a combined force of thugs, and Navy and Air Force personnel. The M.P. for Trincomalee, Mr.R.Sampanthan had sent a detailed narration of the incidents to President Jayawardene, and as should have been expected, the president did nothing except preserve his sphinx-like calm.

We were planning to work that night and put the paper to bed but it did not turn out that way. At 3 in the afternoon I got a warning message. It came from Dr.S.A.Tharmalingam. Dr.Tharmalingam was the president of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Front (TELF), a dissenting section of the Tamil United Liberation Front that broke away, spearheaded by the strongly motivated, articulate radical M.K.Eelaventhan (K.Kanagendran). Dr.Tharmalingam, a benign elderly gentleman in his seventies, a popular medical practitioner and one-time Mayor of Jaffna had been taken in for questioning that morning, along with the organising secretary of the Front, Kovai Mahesan, editor of the high-pitched Tamil language *Suthanthiran*. They were taken in (so the

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police said) in connection with a bomb blast on some train carriages the previous day. It was either a stupid mix-up on the part of the government intelligence that they could not distinguish between the propagandist TELF and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Army (TELA) which was a small, negligible armed group, or it was a deliberate frame-up because the TELF had called for a hartal in protest against the Trincomalee killings, and had sent letters to several diplomatic missions in Colombo pressing the demand for a United Nations Peace Keeping Force to safeguard Tamil lives. (The letters were in fact drafted and prepared at the *Saturday Review* office).

Dr.Tharmalingam who was in custody became aware through a casual remark by a friendly Tamil police officer that the *Saturday Review* office was to be "raided" that same afternoon. The resourceful doctor's tip-off through a secret emissary reached me at 3 p.m. There was no time to lose. With the help of our ever-bustling , and always-on-the-spot Councillor Mr.Kanagarajanayagam, the office staff were packed off home in no time. We quickly grabbed whatever "compromising" material that we could lay our hands on, padlocked securely both the front entrance and back exit and left the premises.

There was an old slow-witted watchman of ours who always went about as if he had a grievance with the world, who was given hush-hush instructions on what to say and what not to say. He was only too happy to see all of us leave early. He nodded his head and sat down to roll his cigar tobacco, a habitual preoccupation of his. The police party had duly arrived, made no attempt to break into the premises and had merely placed seals on all points of access. Their cursory questioning of the watchman revealed nothing. He did not seem to know where the editor lived, couldn't care less, and did not know where any body else lived, except that he himself lived in a back room of the premises.

Two days later, surprisingly, I received a message from an "unofficial" source: would I come to the Deputy Inspector General's (DIG's) office and

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accept the official government order banning the paper? I expressed a certain diffidence with the thought at the back of my mind whether I was walking into a police trap? But I was assured in earnest that there had been no instruction whatsoever to take me in. (Dr.Tharmalingam and Kovai Mahesan had meanwhile been taken to Colombo and held in custody there). I went to the DIG's office in the company of two other SR Councillors. We were treated courteously, served a cup of tea. The DIG (a Tamil), spoke nostalgically about his soccer days in his old school, told me that he was glad to have met me in person , and I was handed the document.

Courtesies apart, we had decided that we were not going to take the ban order lying down. SR's "founding father" Mr.Kanthasamy, himself a leading company lawyer in Colombo made arrangements to challenge the ban before the Supreme Court. Mr.S.Nadesan, Q.C., the leading constitutional lawyer in the country, a celebrated Human Rights activist, a man with no frills, no pose, but equipped with a razor-sharp mind, was glad to accept our brief. He said he was going to enjoy it, after all an old man was entitled to a little enjoyment he chuckled, so there was no question of a fee. His impish delight reminded me of the story of the backstage boy in London who was engaged to keep an eye on the dressing room area in the musical hall known for its can-can dancing. He was told he would be paid a shilling a week. The boy rolled his eyes in amazement. "Oh my sacred aunt," he exclaimed, "you mean I'm going to be paid for this as well?". The case was to be heard before a panel of three judges, and Mr.Nadesan's private opinion about two of them is best unsaid.

In Jaffna, I had begun to breathe easily. So many momentous events had taken place in the country since the 1st of July when the SR was banned that I thought no one had the time to bother about poor me. But I was wrong.

On that fateful morning of 15th September my doorbell rang; someone was keeping his finger on it, as if he did not know how to take it off. I opened the door in a fury, to find it was a police summons. It was a Thursday and

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I was told that I should appear the following Tuesday at 9 a.m. at the 4th Floor of the Criminal Investigation Department headquarters in Colombo, underlined, **without fail.** Besides that summons, the Tamil police inspector who was at the gate in a jeep, did not know what it was all about, except that it was a radio message from Colombo. He appeared friendly, but in a distant kind of way, registering the expression of a man who was not happy with his mission, but had his uniform to think of. He knew as well as I did, that in Sri Lanka's malefic history, the 4th Floor had come to be associated with torture. Within minutes of the departure of the jeep (it was a vehicle to which I had developed an allergy during my SR days), I had made up my mind that I was not going to oblige those sadistic gentlemen who conduct proceedings from that infamous floor. Easily decided, but how was one to escape the consequences? I sat down to think. My mind went back to two earlier occasions where I had managed to stave off the long arm of the law.

The first one happened within three months of the launching of the paper. I had strolled along for a cup of tea at the nearby Premier café. We were then occupying an old-world building at Chapel Street, looking suspiciously like a relic of the Dutch period, with a low roof and a sprawling veranda in front. The office boy came panting into the café. He was in a state of feverish excitement and kept mumbling: "Sir, Sir, army has come". I walked back with him and entered the office building through a "guard of honour" of two soldiers standing with machine guns on either side of the doorway. Inside the building, several others had taken "positions" as if they expected "tigers" to spring from every direction. In my editorial room was seated a young swarthy man in mufti facing my chair, wearing a pair of khaki trousers with wide angle pockets in front, out of one of which the handle of a revolver was peeping out. It looked as if it was meant to be seen. Behind him stood another soldier, all attention. As I sauntered in, I wished the officer a Good Morning, introduced myself and extended my hand. He seemed for a moment nervous and undecided to accept it. Here I was, five foot one in my sandals, going on to fifty two, with two teeth gone, and this young man with a revolver in his front pocket, an armed soldier behind him and the place bristling with

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machine guns, seemed more jumpy in the situation than I was ! The picture was all wrong, particularly from the cinematic point of view.

Even as I sat on my chair, I knew that Round One had gone in my favour. Surprised readers should know that this was typical of the fear psychosis in which the Srti Lankan armed forces operated in Jaffna at that point of time. David Selbourne, who visited Sri Lanka and Jaffna in 1982, wrote,

> Surrounded by awards and trophies, the army chief of staff in Colombo, Major General Tissa Weeratunge, one of the many relatives of President Jayawardene in high places, was honest about the situation. "We are not on top", he told me. In Jaffna they say, a whole truckload of troops goes out to buy a tube of toothpaste or a box of matches. ( "Sinhalese Lions and Tamil Tigers". *Illustrated Weekly of India*, October 17, 1982).

I sat down to face the CID officer (he gave his name as well), keeping the pen in my hand as a possible defence weapon against his revolver. But I knew it was going to be a tame show. The man was plainly uneasy. He looked furtively at Kantha who happened to be in Jaffna at the weekend. He aimed a quick, guarding glance at councillor-office manager Visuvalingam, well past sixty, who was minding his own business. He gave a nervous start when our energetic ex-banker councillor Kanagarajanayagam called loudly for the office boy in another part of the building. Mr.K. was only trying to send the boy for Jaffna's special Tholagatty Farm Nelli juice (rich in Vitamin C) to be served to our gun-toting visitors.

He opened the proceedings by asking me whether I was Mr.Sivanayagam? Whether I was the editor of the paper? Since I had already introduced myself on those points, the questions I thought were superfluous, but that apparently was the set routine to begin an investigation. He had also pulled out a notebook from the other pocket and said that I was required to make a statement. "Of course", I said, not knowing what it was all about. "This is regarding your stamping machine", he said, picking up a little authority

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in his tone. That was an issue that was an old hat to me, because only a month previously an investigating officer of post offices had come down from Colombo, gone through the drill, taken down my statement, and gone back not very happily.

It was a trivial matter, but it showed how desperate the authorities were to soften us indirectly without seeming to control our editorial freedom. The charge against us was that we had "cheated" the Sri Lanka government of Rs.22/40 or some peanut like that, by sending two under-stamped copies of the paper to two addresses in Norway. The threat against us was that the Government had "reason to believe" that we had engaged in this "fraud" on a larger scale! There was of course, as in the case of stamps, two post office checks on foreign mail, a more stringent one at the Colombo end. Any underpaid article is automatically returned to the sender.

I decided to take the war into the government camp. If the officer was not prepared to accept it as a bona fide error (it was only after the second issue of the paper that we used a stamping machine), I accused the postal authorities who had themselves failed to detect the "fraud" at the Colombo end with complicity in the "cheating". I said *Saturday Review* which stood for the upholding of Truth on all matters, whether big or small, will not hesitate to take up the issue and place it before the readers. I told the officer who had meanwhile put down his pen that this was part of my statement and it should go on record. He wilted. He knew that even as a threat with machine guns and revolver it had failed to make an impression. He got up and as a parting shot, he said he had come with authority to seize the stamping machine, but he was not going to do it. He had to save face, and I smiled at him and said thanks to help him along.

We had learnt about the Norway backdrop before the CID man's visit. It had so happened that two Sinhalese residents in Norway whose names were added to the European complimentary list at the last moment were the ones who by some mischance received the underpaid copies. That was the second

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issue of the paper. The two gentlemen had sent the two wrappers to the Sri Lankan ambassador who was in Sweden. The ambassador who saw in this a good chance to exhibit his "patriotism" forwarded the wrappers through the Foreign Office to no less than the President himself. In his letter, the country's representative threw all what he had into it. Here was a "rag" he said that was being circulated all over Europe which was not only "subversive" but was cheating the country of revenue as well. The President had thereupon passed it down for necessary action. Two inquiries were ordered, a postal and this CID one.

With the exit of the officer and his army escort, having partaken of the "Nelli" juice with some hesitation, we thought the chapter was closed. We never mentioned it in our columns. But it was not to be. A few months later, the Jaffna CID informed me of a radio message sent by Colombo headquarters asking me to be present myself at the 5th Floor for a routine inquiry. It sounded a little too casual. When I pressed the local superintendent for more details, he said he would radio back and let me know. He came on the phone a few hours later. I was also asked to bring with me the files in connection with our European list and - the stamping machine. Oh God, that again! Our lawyer Mr.I.F.Xavier, a courageous Human Rights activist, had once told me that it was not required that I respond to any verbal summons from anyone, and that it was well within my right to insist on a written communication.

So I addressed a letter to the DIG, CID, in Colombo under registered cover, stating that there was a verbal message asking me to present myself in Colombo, that if it were genuine, would he kindly confirm it in writing? That, as editor, matters relating to the stamping machine were not within my purview, and that if any inquiry was called for, would he kindly depute a team to call at our office in Jaffna where our officers handling the posting would be only glad to co-operate and produce whatever files necessary, thank you? In the event of a written communication we were of course ready to publish it in the next issue, along with my letter, and make the kind of noise that SR had become known for. I suspected all along that the objective was to keep

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on flogging the stupid matter of the stamping machine as a pretext to get me in. The DIG, a wise man, did not even acknowledge my letter. And so the matter rested again, until on that day, 15th September, 1983.

The *Saturday Review* had in fact learned to live from week to week. The axe, we knew, could fall at any time. But as long as it lasted, there was not a dull moment. Journalism in Sri Lanka, even at the best of times, could be a perilous profession. It is difficult to avoid treading on somebody's corns all the time, and the bigger the corns the greater the peril. But it can also be emotionally satisfying and even exciting. While we compelled unwelcome attentions from the government of the day, we also ran into early hostility from the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), which was the elected party of the people in the Tamil areas. As against that, we were also winning friends and influencing people through a formula that Dale Carneige would not have approved. In fact, we were the only paper that represented Dissent, whether in the North or South; and the amount of support we were getting from the Sinhalese intelligentsia was considerable. Besides, we were also read by an international community, not merely Tamil expatriates, but western Human Rights watchers who were keen followers of the Sri Lankan scene. Jaffna itself was fast getting into the international media map. Media persons, academics and Human Rights activists were regular callers at SR.

Looking back at some old diary jottings I find that within a few months our callers in Jaffna included many familiar names - Alan McDonald and David Page (BBC), David Selbourne *(The Guardian)* Denzil Peiris *(South magazine)*, London , earlier known to me as Editor, *Ceylon Observer*, Colombo), Salmat Ali *(Far Eastern Economic Review,* Hong Kong), K.K.Katyal (*The Hindu*, Madras), Nithin Belle,(*Indian Express*,( Bombay), Tim Moore (New South Wales M.P., and Australian Commission of Jurists), Ms.Amy Young-Anawaty ( Secretary, International Law Group, Washington), Alasdir T.MacDermott (Second Secretary, Press & Political, British High Commission, Colombo), Prof.Urmila Phadnis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Professor V.Suryanarayan, (University of Madras).....Our

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most surprising visitor was US Ambassador John Hathaway Reed, who came accompanied by his First Secretary (Political), the youngish, lanky Kenneth Munro Scott, over whom hangs a tale.

The ambassador was on a three-day visit to Jaffna as chief guest at the first anniversary celebrations of the Evelyn Rutnam Institute in Tinnevely. The Institute was founded by the ever-green octogenarian scholar Dr.James T.Rutnam, a man it was a pleasure to have known, loveable, always bubbling (to my great embarrassment he used to address me as "darling"), and bearing a striking resemblance to Leon Trotsky !

The ambassador had a tight programme which included meetings with the TULF leader and Leader of the Opposition, A.Amirthalingam, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Jaffna The Most Rev.V.Deogupillai, the Bishop of the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India the Rt.Rev.D.J.Ambalavanar, the Mayor of Jaffna R.Visuvanathan, the District Minister of Jaffna U.B.Wijeyakoon, the Jaffna army commander Brigadier Cyril Ranatunge, the Principal of Jaffna College Rajan Kadirgamar and the Chairman of the District Development Council, S.Nadarajah.

Two weeks before his visit we had a telephone message from an official of the American embassy indicating the ambassador's desire to call on the Editor. I expressed my pleasure, while reserving the surprise to myself, not so much at the US embassy's courtesy towards what was after all an anti-Establishment paper, but that the Foreign Office had thought it fit not to raise any murmur. Protocol demanded that all foreign diplomats submit their itinerary when they move out of the capital.

The ambassador who was not a sparkling conversationalist by any means (neither was I for that matter), talked everything but politics while Kenneth Scott maintained a pregnant silence most of the time. I had met Mr.Scott at the Evelyn Rutnam Institute function the previous day and discovered that he had served at the Consulate in Madras earlier, and that he knew some Tamil. He impressed me as a man with a keen mind, and even sensitive to the

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problems of the Tamils. But, in the presence of the ambassador he preserved his correct diplomatic demeanour. Shortly thereafter, Scott was packed off to Washington D.C. because the Jayawardene government thought that his presence in the country was no longer desirable. It appeared that at a high level cocktail party in Colombo Scott had made some careless remarks critical of the Government. So the newspaper gossip went, but this writer has a feeling that his sympathies with the Tamil cause could also have been a reason why he became '*persona non-grata*'.

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"1982 is, from a safe distance, regarded as a "quiet" year, sandwiched between the ferocity of 1981 and 1983". So wrote a foreign commentator on Sri Lankan affairs, Nancy Murray (Racism and the Authoritarian State, Race & Class, Summer 1984). This writer who was in no such safe distance – barely a mile from the then army headquarters at Gurunagar – and editing the *Saturday Review* hardly loveable by army standards, thinks nevertheless Nancy Murray was right. The level of mob and State violence had become relatively muted, with no let-up however in the growing armed Tamil militancy, which only goes to prove that even mob violence in Sri Lanka happens only when engineered and supported by State machinery. There were various reasons why, in that year State and mob violence remained muted. President Jayawardene kept dangling before the TULF leadership District Development Councils, mere skeletons, neither fleshed with authority nor clothed with finances, but yet hoping that the TULF will accept them and retain them in their cupboard. The monthly dialogues continued.

Mr.Jayawardene had also other fish to fry, in the south. 1982 was the year of the Presidential election and the Referendum. Why a Presidential election two years before the due date and why a Referendum ? Jayawardene, a son of a Supreme Court judge during the colonial period had a strange psychopathic side to his nature which on the one hand made him feel subservient to the rules, but on the other hand, when the rules did not suit his style, he took

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elaborate care to change them as he went along so that he could be seen to abide by them.

His status as Executive President was in the first instance arrived at by an effortless constitutional sleight-of-hand. Having been elected as Prime Minister at the general election of July 1977 with a resounding four-fifths majority in parliament, he brought in an amendment in October of that year to the SLFP-framed constitution of 1972. The result was, where there was a President who was a ceremonial Head of State, here was an Executive one; where there was a President appointed by the Prime Minister, here was a President who appointed the Prime Minister; where there was a President who held office for four years at the Prime Minister's pleasure, here was one "elected" by the people for six years! Here was a President who was above the law, the head of State, the head of government, head of the Cabinet, head of the armed forces - the one supreme instrument of State power. He was even known to boast that he had the power to do everything except change a man into a woman or vice versa. Any constitutional doubt as to how an elected Prime Minister could style himself as an elected President was answered by the following provision in the Amendment – "The Prime Minister in office when the amendment came into operation would be ***deemed*** to have been elected President and would hold office for six years". Having steam-rollered the amendment through parliament he gained further time by being sworn in on 04 February 1978, the thirtieth anniversary of independence. His 6-year term was therefore to lapse in February 1984! If however he chose to advance the date of the Presidential election to October 1982, again by amendment, it was not because his democratic urge was so strong, but because he knew the time was just ripe to entrench himself in power. The only foe worth his mettle was Mrs.Bandaranaike, whom he had effectively side-lined from any form of political participation , having expelled her from parliament in 1980 and deprived her of civil rights for a period of seven years. Ironically, the charges against her were abuse of power and misuse of power. Politically muzzled, Mrs.Bandaranaike ran into more problems, both within her party and within her family.

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Deputy Leader of the SLFP Maithripala Senanayake had raised the flag of revolt complaining against her dictatorial tendencies and set up a rival "authentic" SLFP in which her son Anura also joined. Eventually when Anura returned to his mother's fold in May 1982, a brother-sister conflict arose between Anura and sister Chandrika , wife of Sinhalese film idol Vijaya Kumaratunga. When Anura's name was mooted for SLFP nomination for the Presidential election, Chandrika and her husband were among those who opposed it; which made an angry Anura tell a newspaper correspondent who referred to a similar mother-son equation in India (Mrs.Gandhi and Sanjay) "At least Sanjay is lucky in one way. He does not have a brother-in-law". The direct beneficiary of all the bad blood in the Bandaranaike family was naturally President Jayawardene

The only other worthy challenger from the SLFP was Maithripala Senanayake who had missed his chance through his confrontation with Mrs.Bandaranaike. Senanayake was a veteran politician who had his education in Jaffna, who knew his Tamil, who was married to a Tamil and represented a sensitive Sinhalese electorate Medawachchiya , which lay closest to the Tamil North. He had begun his political career as a UNPer, later crossed over to the SLFP, and was a member of the S.W.R.D.Bandaranaike government which introduced legislation in 1956 to make Sinhala the sole official language, while providing for, what Bandaranaike termed, the "reasonable use of the Tamil language in administration". This was later to provide a UNP Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake the opportunity during a language debate to have a witty taunt at Maithripala. Fixing his eyes on him, the bachelor Prime Minister said: "Mr.Speaker, as for the member for Medawachchiya, he believes in Sinhala Only by day and a reasonable use of Tamil by night".

The SLFP had eventually settled for Hector Kobbekaduwa as their Presidential candidate, a man hardly known outside his party, a poor performer as minister and a colourless personality. President Jayawardene could not have desired anything better. On the Tamil side Jayawardene had

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the advantage. Minister Thondaman's hill country Tamil vote was assured for him. Through dextrous handling and by sustaining a fruitless dialogue known as "amity talks" he had the TULF leadership on a constant leash. Unable to offend the President and unable to give a clear direction to the Tamil voter, the TULF leadership merely announced that they were not participating in the election, thus allowing the matter partially in the hands of the Tamil people and the rest in the hands of God!

There were six contestants in the field: Jayawardene himself, Hector Kobbekaduwa (SLFP), Dr.Colvin R.de Silva (Trotskyite Lanka Sama Samaja Party), Vasudeva Nanayakkara (splinter Nava Lanka Samaja Party), Kumar Ponnambalam, (All Ceylon Tamil Congress, and surprisingly, Rohana Wijeweera (Janata Vimukti Peramuna). The last four had no illusions of climbing the presidential chair. They stood for other reasons. It was suspected at that time that two of them were secretly sponsored by Jayawardene himself. The Presidential Act stipulated that where any candidate received "more than half of the valid votes cast", he shall be elected to the office of the President. Where no candidate received the required votes and if there were more than three candidates, as was the case here, the Commissioner of Elections was empowered to "eliminate from the contest the candidate other than the candidate who received the highest and second highest number of votes" and take into account the second and third preferences indicated in the ballot papers cast for the eliminated candidates in determining the winner. While this meant that each voter had one direct vote and two indirect votes, he was not legally bound to cast his second and third preference votes.

One candidate, Kumar Ponnambalam, in a statement sent to *Saturday Review* (11 September 1982) called upon his voters not to cast their second and third preference votes because his party saw the presidential election not as an election of a person to office, but as an opportunity to use it as a referendum to obtain the verdict of the Tamils **in the entire country** to the proposition that ***"The Tamil nation desires to set up an independent State forthwith on the basis of its inalienable right of self-determination".***

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Coming from a person who was a political lightweight, it was not only a positive move in contrast to the TULF's "non-participation" and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Front's (TELF) vain call for a boycott, but was probably the smartest direction given by any Tamil leader during a critical period. It helped to keep the Tamil political objective in view instead of sullen negativism. It also gave an opportunity to Tamils living outside the North and East to involve themselves in the 1977 mandate if they chose to.

Within one month to go for the election, the situation had become intriguing. With no less than six candidates in the field, all of them canvassing at cross purposes, the question was – who was going to eat into, or neutralise whose votes in the first count ? Many were of the view that neither Jayawardene nor the SLFP candidate would be able to get the 50 percent plus votes, and that on the second count Jayawardene's chances could diminish considerably. The country was so engrossed in the mathematical permutation and combination of the voting probabilities that very few realised that the democratic rug was being pulled under their feet. The results, when they came, provided many surprises and the Tamil voters providing most of them.

President Jayawardene romped home a clear winner on the first round itself, gaining 52.91 percent of the valid vote, with the SLFP without Mrs.Bandaranaike bagging 39.07 percent. Dr.Colvin R.de Silva, a veteran who belonged to the vanguard of the old Left, and the architect of the infamous Republican constitution of 1972, came a poor fifth polling less than one percent and Vasudeva Nanayakkara of the New Left finishing last with even less. Here is how the voting went; the total votes gained by each

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|---|---|---|
| J.R.Jayawardene | 3,450,811 | 52.91% |
| Hector Kobbekaduwa | 2,548,438 | 39.07% |
| Rohana Wijeweera | 273,428 | 04.19% |
| Kumar Ponnambalam | 173,934 | 02.67% |
| Colvin R.de Silva | 58,531 | 00.90% |
| Vasudeva Nanayakara | 17,005 | 00.26% |

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candidate and the percentage shares.

The Tamil voter's dilemma was evident from some of the sidelights that the results yielded. The lowest turnout of votes was in districts with Tamil concentrations. The national average was over 80% but in Jaffna only 44.16% polled, the lowest in the 22 districts. Elsewhere in Tamil areas, the poll was higher, with Batticaloa and Trincomalee recording around 70%, which meant that except in the Jaffna district the boycott call was largely ignored. Although Kumar Ponnambalam got the highest vote in the Jaffna district, five electorates out of eleven in the district gave the majority vote to the SLFP. While Kobbekaduwa got less votes than the UNP in his own electorate of Yatinuwara, the Kopay electorate in Jaffna gave him the handsome highest of 13,768 votes, which if interpreted in terms of parliamentary elections would have qualified him to become M.P. for Kopay ! There were two motivations behind this quirky behaviour of this agricultural electorate. The policies of the SLFP in power have always proved favourable to the Jaffna farmer, however unintended they were. Through restrictions on imports and encouragement given to local production Jaffna's cash crops enjoyed extensive outlets outside the peninsula. Invariably, about 90% of the red onions and 80% of chillies grown in Jaffna were available for export to other districts. Tobacco, potatoes, mangoes, vegetables, palmyrah products were other money spinners, so were bananas. Grapes were cultivated exclusively in Jaffna. The hard-working and shrewd Jaffna farmer had therefore a direct stake in a SLFP victory. Apart from that, there was another mixed motive. It was felt by many that the only decisive vote against President Jayawardene would be the one cast in favour of the SLFP. The noteworthy fact was Jaffna alone out of the 22 districts in the island refused to give President Jayawardene a majority; even worse, he ran a poor third.

In the Batticaloa district which had a less homogenous Tamil voting strength, the UNP narrowly edged out Kumar Ponnambalam. Jayawardene got 48,094 votes as against the latter's 47,095, a majority of 999; this, despite the active campaigning for the UNP by two Tamil ministers from the district,

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C.Rajadurai and K.W.Devanayagam. In the Amparai district, renamed Digamadulla following State-sponsored Sinhala colonisation, Ponnambalam secured more than 5% of the vote. He got 8,079 votes as against the JVP's 7,679, Colvin R.de Silva's 967 and Vasudeva Nanayakkara's 377. It is significant to note that the only candidate who won votes even in districts that he did not visit or canvas was Ponnambalam. In the Polonnaruwa district he got 228 votes, in Kalutara 443, in Matara 474, in Galle 425, in Kurunegala 509, in Anuradhapura 22, in Ratnapura 422 and in Kegalle 376.

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Although president Jayawardene won, he saw the writing on the wall. His victory he knew was secured not through a popular contest, but through a series of political manoeuvres and arbitrary amendments to the Constitution; even so the SLFP had increased its share of the national vote from 29.5% in the 1977 elections to 39.07%, a significant ten percent. There was absolutely no hope that the UNP could come back to power with the commanding majority it had in parliament, certainly not under a system of proportional representation, (PR) which was a desirable change introduced by Jayawardene himself under the 1978 Constitution. He now decided to short-circuit the process. Barely a week after the Presidential election, he surprised the country with the announcement that he intended extending the life of the existing parliament by a further six years – from August 1983 to August 1989, by seeking the people's consent through an island-wide referendum. The latter part of his statement sounded noble, and as for referendum as a democratic exercise no one could question its legitimacy. But everyone knew, and he knew that everyone knew, that what he wanted was a captive made-to-order parliament. He justified his extraordinary move by first seeking refuge in the Constitution itself which gave him the necessary cover by providing the device of a referendum; later, by adducing reasons which could have well merited inclusion in Ripley's "Believe it or not" series, except that they were hardly amusing. Having clamped a state of emergency on the very night of the Presidential election, he regaled a dumb UNP Parliamentary group on 2

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November with several tall stories. He told them that the police had made the discovery that the SLFP had come under the control of an "anti-democratic, violent, Naxalite group". That came as news to the entire country, including Mrs.Bandaranaike herself ! He said he did not want sixty or seventy Naxalites to get into parliament, which was exactly what would happen were there to be general elections under the PR system.

The term "Naxalites" was unfamiliar to Sri Lankan ears and many were hearing it for the first time. That was the name by which rural Marxist guerrillas in West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh in India were known. If anyone thought that the president had the JVP in mind, they were in for a surprise again. He pointed the finger at Mrs.Bandaranaike's son-in-law Vijaya Kumaranatunga and his associates within the SLFP. This Naxalite group, he said, had controlled Kobbekaduwa's election campaign and had planned to follow up an election victory with a wave of violent terror. They had a murderous coup in mind. There was even a "hit list" which included himself, his leading ministers **and Anura Bandaranaike.** As for Mrs.Bandaranaike, the plan was to imprison her. President Jayawardene said he was taking all precautions not only to rescue the country from terror, but also protect Mrs.Bandaranaike's family interests! It was a touching performance, with which he swung into action and unleashed his own brand of terror, which was unprecedented in the life of the Sinhalese until then.

Vijaya Kumaranatunga was taken into custody, along with several SLFPers, to be detained until after the referendum was over. Kobbekaduwa was questioned by the police and his passport was cancelled. The Communist Party's Sinhala-language paper *Aththa* (meaning Truth) was banned under emergency regulations on the ground that its publication would be prejudicial to public security and order. Government-backed hooliganism became the order of the day. Several incidents occurred in several parts of the country where UNP politicians brazenly threatened both citizens and police. Some openly flaunted firearms. Two weeks before the referendum, a group of Buddhist monks and Christian clergy who met at Gampaha to

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create public awareness of the need for a general election was set upon by a gang of thugs. Vehicles carrying religious persons were stoned, the meeting disrupted and a Press reporter ended in hospital with head injuries after his camera and wristwatch were snatched. The police, instead of taking action against the hooligans, subjected the organisers of the meeting to prolonged inquiries, and seized 20,000 copies of a leaflet meant for public distribution. A Buddhist monk, Ven,Ratnasara Thero, sued the Superintendent of Police P.Udugampola for preventing him from exercising his fundamental rights of freedom of speech and expression.

The case before the Supreme Court was fortunately heard before four independent judges (Justices D.Wimalaratne, B.S.C.Ratwatte, Percy Colin Thome and M.M.Abdul Cader) and the complainant won the day. The police officer was ordered to pay Rs.10,000 as compensation and Rs.2,100 as costs, and the court recommended disciplinary action against the officer. The Government responded to the verdict by not only paying the damages from Government coffers, but also by giving a merit promotion to the officer! President Jayawardene later took personal responsibility for the decision. The Government explanation was that it was done, "to ensure that police officers follow orders without fear of consequences from adverse court decisions" (Paul Sieghart, Sri Lanka: A Mounting Tragedy of Errors. Report of the International Commission of Jurists, 1984)

A more abominable incident took place later, in June 1983, when a veteran Left politician Mrs.Vivienne Goonawardene won a similar case of infringement of her fundamental rights. The police officer concerned was promoted within 24 hours, and a pro-Government mob transported in State-owned buses surrounded the residences of the three judges who gave the verdict, harangued them in abusive language, while frantic telephone calls by the judges were not even answered by the police. There was another unsavoury incident on Referendum day. A Muslim voter from Colombo M.S.Cader sent a written complaint to the President protesting the behaviour of government M.P. Anura Bastian (a contemporary of his at Royal

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College) who had abused him and brandished a pistol not only at him but also at Queen's Counsel S.Nadesan who was with him in his car. (*Forward,* Colombo,05 January, 1983). Mr.Bastian blandly denied it in parliament the next day and there the matter ended.

An ominous pointer to this trend showed up even before the presidential election. On 21 July 1982, Dr.Ediriweera Saratchandra, Professor Emeritus Sinhala Language and Literature, University of Peradeniya , a man who was acclaimed as the father of contemporary Sinhala theatre and a very embodiment of grace and culture, and one who represented his country as ambassador in Paris, was dragged from a Buddhist Congress platform by Minister Cyril Mathew's "storm troopers" in full view of an elitist audience, pummelled and kicked on the head and face; all because he dared to speak on the decay of moral values in the country. Nothing could have proved his point better. Condemning the incident in our editorial comment (*Saturday Review*, July 31, 1982), we wrote,

> Among the most quote-worthy remarks on Culture that we remember was the one credited to Field Marshal Hermann Goering. Goering was one of the pillars of Adolf Hitler's Nazi establishment of the 1940s. Said Goering: "When I hear anyone talk of Culture I reach for my revolver". We have no doubt that a similar violent feeling must have inspired the thugs who laid their hands and paws on Dr. Ediriweera Saratchandra when he attempted to speak on Sinhala culture at the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress Hall in Colombo on the 21st July…….

It was not as if President Jayawardene's bid to circumvent a general election had not met with popular opposition. But what could be considered as tremendous dissent in normal times failed to register because of the government's heavy-handedness in suppressing every form of opposition by whatever means available. What the Tamils have been going through for two decades and a half, the entire island was experiencing for the first time.

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But sadly for the country, the vast mass of Sinhala people failed to see the moral in it – as subsequent behaviour had shown. Having either watched with apathy or endorsed their successive governments' repression of Tamils, they remained helpless when the same arm of tyranny was turned against them. That courageous Sinhalese champion of Human Rights Dr.Brian Senewiratne quoted in one of his publications (Human Rights Violations in Sri Lanka, 1986) the words of Pastor Niemoller during the Nazi regime in World War II, which are worth being re-recorded.

> *"First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a Trade Unionist.Then they came for me....and there was none left to speak out for me".*

By a supreme irony, *Saturday Review* was the only English-language newspaper in the whole country, a paper begun as the voice of the voiceless Tamils, which gave wide coverage to the State repression at that point of time in which the Sinhalese themselves became primary victims. How did the Colombo newspapers become not only dumb witnesses to the course of history, but also willing handmaidens of Jayawardene's guiles? Jayawardene was one politician on the Sri Lankan scene, who it must be understood, came to power and retained it not through any mass appeal but through manipulative politics. Because of it he developed an emotional dependence on Press publicity. He was quite willing to go out of the way to talk to Press correspondents and developed an inimitable style of an interviewee, like a patriarch engaging in a fireside chat in a good old English castle; which made easy copy from the Pressman's point of view. If his track record showed that his behaviour in many instances was otherwise, it meant only a departure from his natural instinct. That was not the Dr.Jekyll in Jayawardene but the Mr.Hyde driven by power compulsions. He saw in the Press a valuable instrument of State power, and therefore respected it for that reason.

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Fortunately for him, the Colombo Press had been tamed and stripped of its self-esteem even before Jayawardene arrived on the scene. Mrs.Bandaranaike had seen to it. Unlike her late husband former Prime Minister Solomon Dias Bandaranaike, or her political foe Jayawardene, Mrs.Bandaranaike suffered from no intellectual doubts. Helped by the in-built characteristic of her sex – after all women in power have proved more ruthless than the men – she went straight to the point and physically took over the very organisation that lent power to the biggest newspaper chain in the country, the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd., and transferred it to State control during her second spell of power; thereby effectively devaluing the traditional role of the "Fourth Estate" in Sri Lanka's political life. The emergence of the *Saturday Review*, despite its limitations as a weekly, with poor resources, but as a paper with a mind of its own and expressing it without fear or inhibition, was itself a journalistic novelty at that point of time. Ironically, as the political underdog at that time, Mrs.Bandaranaike benefited more by the existence of Saturday Review than the man in power.

The Civil rights Movement (CRM) in Colombo was the first to raise the alarm. At an emergency meeting on 28 October it resolved that the referendum proposal was "ill-considered" and threatened the very basis of democratic parliamentary government. CRM Secretary Desmond Fernando sent a telegram to the President saying that a referendum was no substitute for an election and urged him to abandon the proposal. Later, the Movement listed twenty-one reasons in support of its argument and followed it up with two more statements. The Centre for Society and Religion headed by Fr.Tissa Balasuriya expressed its distrust to the President, the Prime Minister and all members of parliament. The Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) in a statement through its secretary Dr.Wickremabahu Karunaratne called the move a "fraud". The Ceylon Mercantile Union under veteran Trade Unionist Bala Tampoe saw in it a direct attack on the voters. The Hatton Joint Committee of Trade Unions and Voluntary Organisations called on the people to resist dictatorial measures. A statement issued by Lionel Bopage on behalf of the Jathika Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) called for united action by all "anti-

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capitalist forces" to fight state repression.

The Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) through its President Rev.Paul Casperz, while condemning the President's move, made a special appeal to the TULF leadership through the columns of the *Saturday Review* not to soft-pedal its stand against the referendum by being distracted by "opportunistic overtures" from the government. Twenty four Trade Unions met at the Government Clerical Service union (GCSU) hall in Colombo on 11 November and appealed to workers, peasants, students, the youth, women and all minorities including the Tamil-speaking people to cast their NO vote for the symbol POT. (The government vote for a YES vote was the LAMP).

Communist leader Pieter Keuneman commented : "Hitler used the referendum five times to make himself the most notorious dictator of this century. I remember the striking phrase used when Britain's Parliament turned down a proposal to adopt the referendum process in that country. It was said that a referendum could be used, and I quote "to throttle the nation while it sleeps". We should be careful to see that this does not happen here". Pieter Keuneman who belonged to the small Burgher community in Sri Lanka, and one of the last of the distinguished Burghers left in the island after virtually the entire community migrated to Australia in the fifties and sixties (they saw the signs early) was a suave, handsome Cambridge-returned communist who I remembered as a student in Jaffna, quoting the Bhagavad Gita with the same fluency as the Das Capital !

Outside the country, at least three Indian newspapers frowned editorially on President Jayawardene's political methods – *The Hindu*, (29 Oct.), the *Indian Express* (29 Oct.) and the *Times of India* (02 Nov.). *The Hindu* referring to him as a "blooming potentate" recalled the words of the old Trotskyite campaigner Dr.Colvin R. de Silva as early as 1978 : …."the new style president becomes the supreme instrument of State power, pushing the Parliament down to a much diminished second place. The President has been

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steeply upvalued and the parliament precipitously devalued". "The ensuing instability", said the *Indian Express*, "would do no good to Sri Lanka's ethnic problem and might give a fillip to the extremists. Surely this is not the legacy that the 76-year old President would like to leave behind". But that turned out to be exactly the sort of legacy that he left behind.

There was no stopping him. He had already demanded and got undated letters of resignation from all government M.P.s including his Prime Minister and other Ministers. He told them he wanted to re-constitute the parliamentary group "as there is opposition to certain members continuing for the extended period". Meekly, they all signed, with a gold Parker pen thoughtfully provided by the Cabinet secretary according to an all-knowing Colombo newspaper columnist. To most of the MPs this was a small price to pay; they were saved the risk of going before the voters again. On 5 November parliament voted 145 to 4 against prolonging the parliamentary term subject to confirmation in the national referendum. The TULF, running to form, did not oppose the motion. It abstained from voting but said their members would resign their seats on the expiry of the current parliamentary term in August 1983. On 14 November, it was announced that the referendum would take place on 22 December. Two days before the referendum, the state of emergency was extended by a further month.

Meanwhile, a 7-member Supreme Court bench ruled (5 November) by a majority verdict of four to three that an extension of the parliamentary term was not in conflict with constitutional principles. While this happened Chief Justice Neville Samarakoon (who was, in an unusual move by the President appointed to the post from the unofficial Bar), found himself in the public eye engaged in a controversy with the President on the role and status of the executive vis-à-vis the judiciary. The president was piqued by a Supreme Court issue of notice on him and two other respondents in the polls petition filed by the defeated Presidential candidate Hector Kobbekaduwa. While on the one hand he was trying to "tame" the judiciary, the wily President was on the other hand dangling a bait to opposition parties by talking of forming a

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"National Government" once the referendum was over. It was probably meant to neutralise some of them, including the TULF from actively campaigning against the objective of the referendum; although, Mrs.Bandaranaike, as expected stated publicly that she would have nothing to do with the formation of such a government.

The Referendum, calling for a straight YES or NO answer, was gone through under emergency rule in an atmosphere of terror and trickery, especially in opposition strongholds in the Sinhala areas; so much so, even the SLFP Presidential candidate Hector Kobbekaduwa found that he had been impersonated ! Jayawardene had his day, but he secured a mere 3,141,223 YES votes, less than 38% of the registered votes. The important fact to remember was that 2,605,983 voters had the courage to say NO. The cost of the referendum also meant that nearly 1.5 million new voters as at 1982 were denied the right to elect their representatives. By 1987, the total number of disenfranchised voters (mostly Sinhalese) could well have swelled to double that number. "The most gigantic farce to be enacted in this country since the introduction of universal franchise over fifty years ago", commented Professor W.A.Wiswa Warnapala of the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. ( Recent Politics in Sri Lanka: The Presidential Election and the Referendum of 1982 – Navrang, New Delhi, 1983).

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**1983.** This then was the man who began his sixth year of rule, leading the already battered island into a new, bloodier phase of life. The holocaust that occurred in that last week of July 1983 shocked the world and startled it into a new awareness of the comparatively little known island. President Jayawardene's Sri Lanka suddenly began to dominate the world headlines and television screens. Enough has been written about those sordid events. More books have been written on the Sri Lanka of the post-1983 period than of all the first thirty five years of its independence. Suffice it to quote from what a Human Rights activist said about those events,

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> It would be too revolting and unprofitable to recount details of the acts of barbarism committed by Sinhalese mobs. All that the author, a full-blooded Sinhalese, can say is that for the first time he has felt ashamed to be a Sinhalese. It is not one identifies oneself with the hooligan mobs, but there inevitably is a collective responsibility for the behaviour of one's countrymen – hooligan, barbaric or civilised. He who watches while a fellow human being has his limbs cut, belly split open, petrol poured on and burnt to death, is only marginally less guilty than he who does it. In the General Hospital, Colombo, desperately ill Tamil patients had their intravenous infusions disconnected and were thrown out of wards because they were Tamils. Tamil doctors had to take refuge in toilets to avoid assault. ( **Dr. Brian Senewiratne:** Consultant Physician, Princess Alexandra Hospital, Brisbane, Australia: The July Massacre: Unanswered Questions ).

If the year 1983 was a crucial turning point for the country and the Tamil people in many ways, it was no less a critical year for this writer. The banning of *Saturday Review*, the summons to the CID's 4th Floor in Colombo, the escape by a midnight country boat to southern India, the parting from the family, the uprooting from his native soil – it was in fact a journey to an unknown future.

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The *Indian Express* magazine pages of 24 July 1983 (mark the date, it was the day the July upheaval began in Sri Lanka) carried an article by its Bombay staffer Nithin Belle, under the following introductory note,

> **'Early this month, Sri Lanka's only dissident newspaper died a premature death. The author who visited that country recently, writes of his encounter with the Editor of *Saturday Review*'**

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'One may be pardoned for mistaking it for a medium-sized town in Tamil Nadu. The resemblance is striking . For the people here speak only Tamil, the signs and notice boards are in Tamil, the houses flanking the narrow streets are jammed together, the women including the girls wear their typically long saris, and the temples and general atmosphere are that of a town in Tamil Nadu. Jaffna's soul is in Tamil Nadu: only its body is in Sri Lanka. Even the people believe in it – Tamil Nadu is their Mecca, their spiritual homeland, just a score miles across the sea as the crow flies. And Sri Lanka is that far-away alien land from where the soldiers with their long guns come.

Walking in one of those narrow streets in Jaffna not so long ago, one came across a typical medium-sized house which is the office of a weekly English tabloid, *Saturday Review*, one of those rare publications which had the temerity to cock a snook at the all-powerful State. Naturally its days were numbered. ...

Early this month, the Sri Lanka Government banned the *Saturday Review,* together with another Tamil weekly, *Suthanthiran*, for publishing "grossly distorted versions of incidents in Jaffna". As *Saturday Review* Editor S.Sivanayagam told me last October just a few days before the Presidential election at his Jaffna office, "If he (President Jayawardene) comes to power, we may have to be on the look-out." *Saturday Review* came into being in the wake of the promulgation of the dreaded Prevention of Terrorism Act. Under the Act, the army can detain anyone it considers to be a terrorist, keeping the person in custody for three months without having to produce him before a law court. The relatives of the person concerned have no right to know the detenu's whereabouts. There is no redress possible against the army's decision. And after the prescribed three months have elapsed the army can keep on extending

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the detention period for a total of eighteen months – without trial. The "terrorist", it is alleged, may be tortured or killed with no one the wiser, during those eighteen months. There have been several instances of Tamil youth being detained and then tortured to death in the army's notorious camps in Elephant Pass and Anuradhapura, merely on the suspicion of being terrorists. Youths distributing pamphlets demanding justice or sometimes a separate nation for the Tamil north are labelled "terrorists" and taken to these treacherous detention camps. Sivanayagam, like many others in Jaffna, was totally opposed to the Terrorist Act.

On January 30, 1982, he launched the *Saturday Review* to highlight the Jayawardene Government's violation of human rights. His weekly did not subscribe to any ideological group. (In Sri Lanka there were many shades of Marxist, Leninist and Che Guevarite revolutionaries.) When one reads the *Saturday Review* one realises how insipid and dull the pro-Establishment newspapers in Sri Lanka are. A majority of them have become mouthpieces of the party in power- yesterday the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), today the United National Party (UNP), and so on. As Sivanayagam said, the entire English, Sinhala and Tamil Press in Colombo has gone out of its way to support J.R.Jayawardene. Even the supposedly independent *The Island* and the *Sun* newspapers now back the government. "There is a kind of disproportionate publicity given to the President". Every time a newspaper roots for the party in power, it not only loses its credibility but also its independence, Sivanayagam explained. The largest newspaper chain in Sri Lanka, the Lake House group was taken over by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party when it was in power.

When the *Saturday Review* first began publication, it filled

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the much-needed credibility gap in the Sri Lankan newspaper world. It criticised Jayawardene's UNP government wherever and whenever it could. For instance, just before the Presidential election in October 1982, it came out with a report on a proposed US-Sri Lanka arms deal. It questioned the tiny island's need to have a "defence budget" of US$ 63 million (in 1980). Though the UNP government took note of all these "provocative" writings it did not touch the *Saturday Review*. Sivanayagam explained why he was allowed to publish such a bold tabloid for all those months, when most of the large newspapers had withdrawn from the fight. "The shell", said Sivanayagam "in Sri Lanka is democratic". There have been occasional moves to harass him, but for the greater part the government left him alone. "JR is very sensitive about his image abroad and does not want to tarnish it", Sivanayagam said, attributing the President's image-consciousness to the government's not coming down heavily on him. But he knew that it would not last long and he was proved right early this month.

During the relatively short existence of seventeen months, *Saturday Review* reached Tamil expatriates in about forty countries. It had a print order of 5,000, but Sivanayagam claimed that the readership was ten times that - as compared to an average of three times for most other Sri Lankan newspapers. The *Saturday Review* has unfortunately been banned at a time when publications like it are all the more needed to temper extremist sentiments. Jaffna and the North are today bubbling cauldrons which may explode at any moment.

**During my visit there, I spoke to a cross-section of people – politicians, government officials, students, terrorists, priests, ordinary people – and one thing emerged clearly; the Tamilians there are determined to win freedom for their**

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**"Eelam".** Though some believe in getting their "independence" through peaceful means, a growing number – especially among the youth - have been proselytised into accepting violence as the only way out.

For the Tamilians in Sri Lanka, the perceived repression by the State has now become a reality. Groups of soldiers move in clusters, their guns cocked in readiness. At night, the law of the jungle prevails. As the Mayor of Jaffna, R.Visuvanathan admitted to me, after 6 p.m. the police go off-duty as they are afraid of being killed in traps laid by terrorists. So, if a crime is committed at night, it is only reported the next day. I was warned by officials not to take photographs of soldiers, as I would be shot first and questioned later. The tales of torture at the Elephant Pass army camp – a narrow strip of land in the North which joins Jaffna peninsula to mainland Lanka – are many and chilling.

The open hatred between the Sinhalas and the Tamilians is also tragic. In Jaffna, if you do not speak Tamil, people ignore you – the shopkeepers, cabbies and bus drivers. **But when you tell them you are an Indian, there is a sudden transformation in their attitude and they are all helpful.** But woe betide the Sinhalas in Jaffna or the Tamilian in a Sinhalese majority area.

The extremists are slowly taking over the secessionist movement in the North and East. Sivanayagam observed that the repressive laws framed to deal with the Che Guevara insurgents in the early seventies were used by the government to tackle the agitating Tamil youth. The result, the non-violent demonstrators went underground, formed guerrilla groups such as the "Tigers" and took to violence. Escaping to India from Jaffna is not very difficult and the "Tigers" escaped to India.

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> In fact, by banning *Saturday Review*, the government might only be playing into the hands of the extremists, who, it is reported, will go to any length to attain their objectives. The Tamil movement itself has evolved in various phases. Initially, there were the first generation leaders of the Tamil United Liberation Front, such as Amirthalingam and Sivasithamparam. Then came the second generation – Tamil Eelam Liberation Front leaders such as "Eelaventhan" and finally the third generation comprising the radical groups such as the "Tigers", the "Gues" and the "Eros". In between came the moderates such as Sivanayagam, along with the first two groups, who did not let the movement get out of hand.
>
> By choking the only means of expression available to the Tamilians, the government will no doubt gain temporarily, but in the long run, the action will ricochet on them, when immature and raw "revolutionaries" take over the movement. Already the signs are ominous, as trains and buses are burnt, military depots looted and army men killed. It may not take long for Jaffna to become another Ireland. And the undulating plains and the calm sea coast of Jaffna which ought to reverberate music, might one day be converted into a battlefield'.

Nithin Belle was prophetic to the dot. A battlefield Jaffna soon became and the very night of the morning that the article appeared in print in India, the first battle had taken place in Jaffna. It was Saturday the 23rd July 1983. Two Delhi-based media men, Mark Fineman of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and Nicholas Banks of NBC News happened to be in Jaffna that day. Jaffna in fact had begun to attract international media attention for quite some time and *Saturday Review* became the obvious first point of call to visiting correspondents and academics. The paper being banned at that time, those two found me at my home. We had a long political chat over beer and lunch at the Ashok Hotel, in the company of Professor Luther Jeyasingham of the

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Jaffna University and Attorney-at-law R.Balasubramaniam. Many of us had begun to share the feeling of some undefined disaster. I took the two journalists to Bishop's House and Bishop Deogupillai, known to be a highly committed Tamil was no more optimistic about the future than I was. But none of us was to know how fast events were to overtake us, beginning that same night.

Around 11.40 p.m. I was seated curled up with a book at my home in Nallur, when suddenly the electricity voltage dropped and the bedside lamp became a mere flicker. As I got out to go into the garden outside I heard the first explosion. From where I stood in the faint moonlight, it sounded frightening and not too far away. This was followed by what sounded like rapid gunfire, punctuated by more explosions. The sound of the fire continued but it appeared to be receding into the distance. The whole thing might not have lasted more than ten minutes. We were to know about it only the next day. That was the deadly ambush by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the mowing down of thirteen Sri Lankan soldiers at Thinnevely that was to rock the entire country for the next several days.

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*The author seen with U.S. ambassador John Hathaway Reed when the latter called at the editorial office of the Saturday Review, Jaffna, 1982.*

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# Chapter 17

## 1983: The pogrom as the outside world saw it: "Quotes"

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# 1983: The pogrom as the outside world saw it: "Quotes"

**"Paradise" in ruins - Kassel, Germany,**

**Riots against the Tamil population in Sri Lanka have been a recurring event for 30 years.** They broke out again on 24 July 1983 with unexpected and indescribable brutality. For one week, organised groups ran amok; destroyed, plundered, set fire to houses and factories, killed and humiliated innocent and defenceless victims, while parts of the security forces (army, air force, navy and police) not only let this happen, but to some extent incited the disturbances or participated themselves.

Sufficient evidence exists to prove that the riots in the last days of July 1983 by no means occurred suddenly and spontaneously. On the contrary, a carefully prepared plan (by the Government or parts of it) for the destruction of houses, shops and other property of the Indian Tamil and Ceylon Tamil population seems to have existed long before the rioting began.

Moreover, the settlement activities of thousands of refugees from the plantation area of the central highlands, who made their home in the areas around Vavuniya, Mannar and Trincomalee after the disturbances of '77 and '81 had long been a source of irritation to the Government. The Government planned to expel these settlers. Both aims were achieved.....

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Though violation of the curfew and plundering was to result in shooting without warning, these governmental actions did not have the effect of reinstalling law and order. *"We cannot shoot our Sinhalese brothers*", a lot of soldiers said (99% of the soldiers are Sinhalese). So the terror gangs – not held back by anyone – took over the streets……According to witnesses even pupils of a large Buddhist college participated in the riots in the first few days in Colombo….."( *The reference was to Ananda College – S.S.)* From Introduction to *SRI LANKA –"PARADISE "IN RUINS,* Sri Lanka Co-ordinating Centre, Kassel, Germany.

**What a Norwegian tourist saw -** *Daily Express*, **London.**

**A tourist told yesterday how she watched in horror as a Sinhalese mob deliberately burned alive a bus load of Tamils. And she said she had heard other tourists describe how women and children have been murdered in the same way. Mrs.Eli Skarstein, back home in Stavanger, Norway, told how she and her 15-year old daughter, Kristin, witnessed one massacre. "A mini bus full of Tamils was forced to stop in front of us in Colombo", she said. A Sinhalese mob poured petrol over the bus and set it on fire. They blocked the car doors and prevented the Tamils from leaving the vehicle. "Hundreds of spectators watched as about 20 Tamils were burned to death". Mrs.Skarstein added: We can't believe the official casualty figures….Hundreds, maybe thousands must have been killed already…The police force 95% Sinhalese did nothing to stop the mobs. There was no mercy. Women, children and old people were slaughtered. Police and soldiers did nothing to stop the genocide"** *DAILY EXPRESS*, London, August 29.



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**Who will help the Tamils? -** *New Statesman,* **London.**

**Sri Lanka is burning again. Several hundred Tamils have been killed in the past week, and at least 20,000 have been made homeless. Now the Sri Lankan government says that it is creating an emergency committee to provide food and shelter for the Tamil refugees. The Tamils can be forgiven if they do not show much gratitude for this act of charity, for this week's horrific violence, in which Sinhalese lynch mobs roamed the streets of Colombo, attacking anyone who happened to be a Tamil, is the direct fault of the Sri Lanka government itself.**

**For years, leading Sinhalese politicians have encouraged their fellow Sinhalese to see the minority Tamils as second-class citizens**. Matching action with words, they have introduced laws and regulations which have made it almost impossible for the Tamils to find decent education or employment. They have also supervised a programme of colonisation under which Tamil farmland has been handed over to the Sinhalese.

"Law and Order" was one of President Jayawardene's main slogans when he was elected in 1977. Yet there is neither law nor order in Sri Lanka; Jayawardene himself has seen to that. Under the Public Security Act, the police and army are allowed to bury or cremate dead bodies without any need for an inquest or post mortem. Under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, people can be detained for up to 18 months without trial or explanation. Torture has become a normal part of police procedure, an Amnesty International's report this month showed.

**In Britain there may be a tendency to view the violence in Sri Lanka as part of some unfathomable feud in a faraway country of which we know nothing. Yet Britain is inescapably**

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**involved.** ( emphasis mine – S.S.) It was Britain, as the colonial power, which brought Indian Tamils to Ceylon to work the tea estates. It was Britain which encouraged the indigenous Tamils to help with the running of the colonial bureaucracy. When Britain departed, in 1948, the Sinhalese took over the country and began to exact their revenge. The plantation Tamils were stripped of their citizenship, and the indigenous Tamils were stripped of their jobs.

Even today, Britain's connections with Sri Lanka are close. Sri Lanka's main export, tea, is still controlled by the British companies who set the price. Sinhalese colonisation of Tamil areas is being helped by a huge irrigation scheme, partly paid for with British money. Certainly the Tamils themselves consider that Britain has some responsibility for their fate. Is it too much to hope that the British government may, at last, seek to make amends? In October, President Jayawardene will pay an official visit to London. **He should be told that Britain is no longer prepared to bankroll a man who is presiding over a campaign of near-genocide against part of his population.** (emphasis mine- S.S.) - ***New Statesman,*** London, Editorial, 29 July, 1983.

**An Eye Witness Account. Colombo - *Voices,* Hong Kong:**

I reached Colombo on the 23rd July, 1983. The purpose of the visit was to organise a regional meeting on the deteriorating human rights situation, particularly in the northern and eastern parts of the country. I had already fixed appointments with friends for the 24th and 25th July. After discussing and working out the details of this meeting, I was to leave Colombo on the night of July 25th.

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On the 24th, while at a meeting, I came to know of the killing of thirteen Sri Lankan soldiers by the "Tigers" in Jaffna. The killing was sparked off by reports of the kidnapping and rape of two Tamil women by the soldiers. One of the women had committed suicide. My friends had at that time, expressed fears of retaliation by the armed forces in Jaffna. Our meeting broke up at about 6.30 p.m. and about an hour later, we decided to go and have dinner at the Green Cabin on Galle Road. Next day, a friend rang me up at 9.30 a.m. to say it would not be possible for me to move out of the hotel, as there was trouble in the city. I went down to the lobby, and there was commotion all round. I heard a lady tourist say that she had not come here for this kind of excitement. After discussing the situation with the receptionist, I decided to make a dash for the airport and wait there till evening for the flight. I did not wish to be stuck in the city because I had appointments in India the next day. Consequently, I took a taxi and while cruising down Galle Road – the main road of the city - I saw shops on fire. People were trying to break open the shutters of some shops. Washing machines, air conditioners, and other things were lying half-burnt and smashed on the road. Buses and cars were overturned and were burning. A man was lying on the footpath, bleeding. Here and there, I saw policemen but they were standing by, just watching. There were no fire brigades in sight. We had hardly gone about two furlongs when a mob stopped us. I showed them my passport and ticket and told them that I was a foreigner trying to reach for the airport. They allowed me to pass. By this time, I was getting nervous. I was in two minds on whether to proceed or turn back. While I was then contemplating, another mob stopped us.

This time, before I could repeat my lines, one of them took out my suitcase and put it on the road. Within minutes, one of the chaps from the mob started to filter out the petrol from the car.

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One of them said to me "Go back! All flights are cancelled". I was in panic. As he appeared to understand English, I requested him to tell his friends to leave some petrol on the taxi for me to get back to the hotel. I managed to get back in one piece. I checked into my room again. From the window, I saw one house after another go up in flames. Brighton Hotel, where I was staying is in the heart of Wellawatte – a predominantly Tamil area. Across the hotel is the Ramakrishna Mission. Coaches to Jaffna used to leave from here. Both the coaches that were parked inside the mission compound were burnt along with other vehicles parked inside. I saw mobs ransack the rooms, smashing window panes and furniture. I saw four Tamils lie flat on the overhead water tank, while there was looting and plunder downstairs. A contingent of about five policemen stood watching. The hotel telephones were cut off. We heard there was going to be an attack on the hotel, which belonged to a Tamil whose house had been completely gutted. Later, I came to know that he and his family had taken shelter on the 5th floor.

The hotel had a large number of foreign guests, mostly French tourists. At about 6 p.m. the police arrived to protect us. I heaved a sigh of relief. The sense of relief was, however premature. There were about seven policemen and one inspector. Came evening, they started boozing. The hotel management was supplying them drinks freely. Some foreigners objected to this. The manager however told us that if he did not supply them with liquor, they would get someone to attack the hotel. That night, most of us lay awake in the lobby. We would go to our rooms from time to time to stretch a little. By nightfall, the Ramakrishna Mission presented a pathetic sight. Scores of Tamils, mostly women and children started pouring in with their small bundles of belongings. From the hotel, I saw them lying on the floor. Police vans brought Tamil families to the

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mission throughout the night and the next day. Curfew was imposed at 6 p.m. but from time to time, we could see fires going up. The next day too was spent under tension. Everyone hoped that the situation would return to normal and the curfew would be lifted. Meanwhile, I came across a fellow countryman on a consultancy job in Sri Lanka. His company did help to raise my spirits. On the afternoon of 26th July, the hotel ran short of foodstuffs and there was no way of getting fresh provisions because of the curfew. We survived mostly on sandwiches.

On the 27th morning, I and my fellow countryman managed to get curfew passes to go to the airport. On the way I saw destruction as I had never seen before. Galle Road presented a sorry picture. Big department stores, shops, and houses lay in ruins. Military and police were patrolling the city. On the way, we were stopped several times. I could still see columns of dark smoke, which meant that the situation was not yet under control. We finally managed to get to the airport. To our utter dismay, most of the flights were cancelled. The airport was jam packed with foreigners trying to get out. The only airline that was operating was Air India, flying full capacity to Bombay and Madras. I saw Tamil men pleading with the station manager to get their womenfolk out. One of the Tamils told me that he had lost everything except the clothes on his body. The airport presented the picture of one huge refugee camp. Fortunately for us, we managed to get a room in the Hotel Oriental Pearl, which was within walking distance from the airport. Our daily routine was to visit the airport regularly in an endeavour to get any flight available out of Colombo. On the second day of our stay, all the Tamil families who had taken shelter were asked to leave. The management had received a telephone call that thugs were going to attack the hotel because it was sheltering Tamils.

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Finally, on the 29th July, we managed to get a flight out of Colombo. That ended the nightmare. It was a nightmare for me although I was not a target of attack. I shudder to think how those who were the actual targets must have suffered. What really hurt was that if the security forces had discharged their duties, this immense tragedy could have easily been avoided. Unfortunately, no such effort was made and the mobs were just allowed to run wild , playing havoc with peoples' lives and properties.

I have seen many riots in my own country, but nothing compared to what I saw in Colombo. **If I were a Tamil, I would never ever feel secure in that country again. Since that week in Colombo, I have often asked myself: Did the Tamils deserve this? What was their fault? Why could not the Sri Lankan government act with responsibility in discharge of its duties? It is a government's duty to protect the lives and properties of all its citizens irrespective of whether they belong to a minority or a majority community. My own feeling is that the Sri Lanka government miserably failed to discharge both its legal and moral obligations /duties towards the Tamils. Till today, there have been no expressions of regret on the part of the Sri Lanka government. Is such an attitude not an insult to our human conscience? How will the conscience of the international community react to this?"** (emphasis mine – S.S.) *VOICES. Vol.7. No.2 August 1983. Published by Christian Conference of Asia-Urban; Mission. 57, Peking Road, 5/F, Kowloon, Hong Kong.*

**"Only the violin was saved"** – *The Hindu*, India:

**After three days of "total confinement" in a five-star hotel in Colombo, a Carnatic music troupe is back in Madras –**

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**almost on the verge of collapse. "All our belongings were looted, we remained shut in our room, without a dress to change. We have lost even our chappals, and we landed on our soil barefoot", said A.Kanyakumari, the young violinist who accompanied M.L.Vasanthakumari, the famed singer, during her coast-to-coast performance on the island.**

The troupe arrived in Madras today by a special flight from Colombo. MLV later left for Rishi Valley where she teaches music. The mridangist in the troupe was Tiruvarur Bakthavatsalam. "I always carry my violin with me and so it is safe; all other instruments, including the mridangam, are lost", Kanyakumari sadly remarked.

The troupe gave five recitals in different parts of Sri Lanka and also completed its recording schedule with the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). On the morning of July 26, when they were about to leave for the studios, they were told not to stir out of their house lest they be attacked by extremists. Thereafter, their hosts, the Broadcasting Corporation officials took the troupe to a place of safety. They had no time to collect their belongings, and later they came to know that a band of hooligans had stormed the house they had stayed in which belonged to a Tamilian, and taken away whatever they could lay their hands on. Among the valuables lost were suitcases containing all their clothes."- *The Hindu, Madras , July 30, 1983.*

**Burning Passions : How Nuwara Eliya was razed to the ground -** *New Statesman:*

To escape the paralysing summer heat and ill health of the surrounding coastal areas of what was then called Ceylon, the British built Nuwara Eliya as a charming replica of rural



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England. Two weeks ago, this small, and in may ways rather beguiling, Sri Lankan town became the focal point for much of the communal violence that has engulfed the island.

As the town burnt to charcoal and the Tamil inhabitants ran for their lives, I watched Sri Lankan soldiers on the spot stand idly by. While the officers in charge may have been in two minds about allowing the mob violence to spread, their rank and file were not. The soldiers on the street seemed quite willing to stand and look as the inhabitants burnt one another's property, where this conformed to their own prejudices.

Nuwara Eliya is at the heart of tea plantation country: the western tourists' image of smiling tea pickers clad in brightly coloured cotton saris could almost exist here. Its remote position, perfect for idling tea magnates and holidaying imperial army officers, ensured that the town escaped the great social and economic movements of modern times, and much of the racial turmoil of the last 30 years of Sri Lanka history – until now.

The curfew on Friday 29 July was a farce, serving only to keep civilian cars off the road. Although the troops did not actively participate in the mayhem themselves, they certainly did nothing to discourage it: crowds were allowed to roam the town at will. Many of the casualties of that day poured into the back of our hotel, seeking what treatment they could find. They maintained that much of the damage was done by imported thugs. How else could it be that a seemingly peaceful community imploded and itself destroyed what had taken years to build?" - *New Statesman, London. 12 August, 1983.*

**"Waves of Blood Lust" – Eye witness, Dusseldorf, Germany :**

West German eyewitnesses of the violence on Thursday

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referred to a "wave of blood lust" by the Sinhalese against the country's minority Tamils. Holiday makers who returned from Sri Lanka to Dusseldorf, said hundreds of Tamils had been murdered, and **even their hotel waiter told them proudly, "we have killed several of them".** A business consultant said a dozen houses had been burned down near the popular seaside resort of Bentota, among them the local chemist shop, where the holiday makers had made purchases the previous day ..."
*-The Hindu, Madras, report from Oslo, July 29*

Sri Lanka: The Tamil tragedy – India Today, Cover Story:

The 35-km ride from Katunayake International Airport into Colombo in a slow Mitsubishi coach driven by a nervous Sinhala is enveloped in silence. Almost every Indian visitor is heading for the Lanka Oberoi, or the Galle Face, or the Ceylon Intercontinental – hotels that have escaped the attention of mobs in search of hiding Tamils. Suddenly, the colour of a visitor's skin is crucial – if it is dark, and he looks nervous, he is liable to be mistaken for a Tamil, and Tamils venturing out of doors in Colombo are asking to be lynched.

Sri Lanka's capital city for most of last fortnight looked like it had been taken by a conquering army. Street after street lay empty to the gaze, although the dawn-to-dusk curfew had been lifted. Small, watchful groups of Sinhalas dotted the side walks, providing flesh-and-blood counter points to the hundreds of burnt-out shops and factories and homes that lined the once bustling markets and roads. The arson was professional – charred shells fallen in on themselves, with blackened sign boards announcing Tamil ownership hanging askew, here and there a liquor shop with hundreds of broken bottles littering the

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floor, or a jewellery mart with showcases battered in and the gold and the gems carefully removed before the torching. Fifty yards from the Indian High Commission, right next door to the police headquarters, a stone's throw from the presidential palace, stood a huge block, blackened and devastated. **"The shops in this block had heavy grill doors," recalled an eyewitness, "so an army truck was used as a battering ram to break through them, and then the soldiers sprang in with Sinhala battle cries to claim the lion's share of the loot"** (emphasis mine – S.S.)

The Sri Lankan Press was censored, and so was the foreign press corps, and foreign correspondents were granted curfew passes that restricted their movements between their hotels and the office in the Fort area of the Director of Information where Don John Francis Douglas Liyanage, a brisk, balding bureaucrat and secretary to Information Minister Ananda Tissa de Alwis presided over daily press briefings. Liyanage's daily message of increasingly rosy pictures of a "normalising " situation contrasted too sharply with the reality of Colombo, a city like a pressure cooker with the lid on." - *India Today*, Cover Story, August 31, 1983.

**Geneva: Sri Lanka defends action during riots:**

Geneva, Aug.23. The Sri Lanka Government has defended its conduct in last month's race riots before the United Nations sub-commission on human rights, where it had been accused of indifference to the fate of the Tamil minority. Sri Lanka's ambassador Mr.Alexander Jayakody said allegations that the Sri Lanka Government remained passive during the violence were utterly false. "There may have been individual cases of dereliction of duty by government agents but the main law and

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order forces of the Government were active in restoring order and normality".....

Mr.Jayakody described as completely false that security forces had carried out large-scale killings. He denied his country's Anti-Terrorism Act was unique, saying it was similar to legislation in force in Australia, Canada, India and Britain.... - *Reuter report, The Hindu*, August 24, 1983.

**The Welikade prison massacres: LAWASIA report.**

*"Sri Lanka: A country in crisis" Patrcia Hyndman, Senior Lecturer in Law, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.* June 7, 1985. (Extracts): In addition to the events recorded above there were two violent massacres in the Welikade prison in Colombo during which fifty-three Tamil prisoners, arrested on suspicion of terrorist activity, were killed. The setting in which the prison riots occurred was as follows: there were between eight hundred and eight hundred and fifty convicted prisoners in the prison. Some of these prisoners were Tamils, though most of them were Sinhalese. These eight hundred or so prisoners had been convicted in the ordinary courts of non-political crimes, and such people comprised the prison's usual population. At the time of the riots these prisoners were housed in the galleries and cells in the upper section of the Welikade prison. On average there were three prisoners in each cell.

In addition to the above prisoners, there were also in the gaol at the time, **seventy three Tamil political prisoners who had been arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.** These people had been detained originally in army custody at Panagoda army camp, but had recently been transferred to the Welikade prison. The reason for the transfer was that complaints had been made about the treatment which such detainees

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received whilst being held in army custody. Such complaints have been documented by Amnesty International in a report on a visit made early in 1982, by Professor Virginia Leary in a report for the International Commission of Jurists in 1981, and by Mr.Tim Moore who prepared a report for the Australian section of the International Commission of Jurists in June 1983. The government has denied the accuracy of the complaints. Arrangements nevertheless had been made to transfer prisoners from army custody to civilian prisons, and, in June 1983, the seventy three Tamil political prisoners in question had been moved to Welikade gaol.

Of these seventy three, some had been convicted under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, some were awaiting trial, and against some no charges at all had been made. Those yet to be charged or tried were being held under detention orders under the authority of the Act. In the debate in Parliament on August 4th, Mr.A.Bandaranaike stated that thirty three of these prisoners were still awaiting trial. (Hansard, August 4th p.1361). The Prevention of Terrorism Act gives wide powers of detention without trial, and has been severely criticised for the lack of protection which it provides for those held under its provisions..

Most of these seventy three prisoners were housed, not with the other prisoners in the upper section, but in separate cells on the ground floor of the prison in a part called the Chapel section. A few of them were held in a different section in a separate building, the Youthful Offenders Building. Mr.A.L.de Silva, the Superintendent of Prisons, when testifying to the magisterial enquiry of July 26th, described the accommodation arrangements as follows, *"....the prisoners handed over to me from army custody consisting of about 73 in number were*

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*housed on the ground floor of the wings which are identified as B3, C3 and D3. On July 25th, I housed these prisoners as follows: 6 in B3, appellants convicted of murder , 29 detainees in D3 and 28 detainees in C3. Of the 73 referred to, the balance were kept in a separate section in a separate building".*

**In the massacre which occurred on July 25th all of the prisoners held in B3 and D3 were massacred and killed.** (Among the 35 killed *were three of the stalwarts belonging to the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), Selvarajah Yogachandran alias Kuttimani, Nadarajah Thangavelu alias Thangadorai, and Ganeshanathan Jeganathan, known as Jegan – S.S.)* The prison is located in a densely populated and poor area of the city. Mr.Mervyn Wijesinghe, Secretary to the Ministry of Justice, told us that, on July 25th, noisy, violent crowds collected in the vicinity of the prison. They were shouting and rioting and a highly charged atmosphere was created. The prisoners could hear the angry crowds outside and could see smoke and flames from the destruction of property which was going on all over the city. Tension grew, and at about 2 p.m. between three and four hundred prisoners rioted, and forced their way into the Chapel section. There, wielding implements said to consist of clubs and iron bars, they attacked and murdered the Tamil political prisoners. Parts of the iron supports from railings around the gallery area had been torn out and were being used as weapons. The different accounts we heard indicated that the prison guards were either unable or unwilling to control the outbreak of violence……

After this first massacre the prison authorities moved from the Chapel section the remaining twenty eight political prisoners who had survived. All of these persons had been in the C3 section. They were now moved to a separate building

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some distance away, and were housed on the ground floor of the Youthful Offenders Building. The other Tamil political prisoners were already housed here and these prisoners were now moved upstairs. … When I asked why the prisoners were not immediately removed from the gaol in view of the obvious danger they were in, I was told by a government spokesman that a second riot was simply not anticipated. He added that in any case it was not possible, because of all the troubles elsewhere, to evacuate the Tamil prisoners at that stage, as it would have been necessary to provide strict security if they were to be moved through the prison since the other prisoners had such violent feelings towards them……

As it was, the prisoners remained in the Welikade prison and, in the afternoon of July 27th, there was a second massacre in which seventeen more of the remaining thirty seven Tamil political prisoners were killed. Two further Tamil prisoners were severely wounded and one of them later died in hospital, making the total killed on this second occasion to eighteen…….

**One of these eighteen murdered prisoners was Dr. Somasundaram Rajasunderam, a medical practitioner and Secretary of the Gandhiyam movement, whose case was featured in the Amnesty International July 1983 newsletter.** The Gandhiyam movement is a social services organisation, members of which had been helping to resettle Tamil displaced persons who had fled to the northern part of the country as a result of earlier disturbances. Accusations had been made by the government to the effect that this organisation had links with the terrorists. Dr.Rajasundaram and his wife had devoted a great amount of work and time helping these displaced persons and also in working to assist disadvantaged members of the Indian Tamil community. Dr.Rajasunderam had been arrested

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under the Prevention of Terrorism Act in April 1983, accused of "association with Tamil terrorists". Since then, he had been held without charge or trial. It was reported by Amnesty International that in May he had been beaten up in the Panagoda Army Camp where he was being held incommunicado. The report of the Judicial Medical Officer showed that he had sustained injuries as a result of his treatment there.

Accounts of the massacres were given later to journalists by some of the Tamil prisoners who survived the second attack, after they escaped from Batticaloa gaol (to which they were now transferred**). One of the accounts was given by Mr.S.A.David, the President of the Gandhiyam movement. He had been arrested with Dr.Rajasunderam in April 1983.** His description of the Welikade prison massacre was as follows.

> ***On July 25, 1983 Sinhala prisoners attacked the detainees in the Chapel section of the prison and murdered 35 persons among whom were Kuttimani, Jegan and Thangathurai. From eye witness accounts, Kuttimani's eyes were gouged and his blood drunk by his attackers. After killing six Tamils including Kuttimani in one wing, the attackers killed 28 Tamils in the other wing. A boy of sixteen years, Mylvaganam, had been spared by the attackers and was crouching in a cell. A jail guard spotted him and stabbed him to death. The 35 dead were heaped in front of the statue of Gautama Buddha in the yard of Welikade prison, as a Minister so aptly described as a "sacrifice to appease the blood thirsty cravings of the Sinhala demons". Some who were yet alive raised their heads and called for help but were beaten down to death in the heap. The attackers then made entry into the other wing through openings in the first floor but the jailers there refused to give the keys and persuaded them to leave".***



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**Second Massacre:** 28 Tamil detainees in this wing were transferred to the ground floor of the Youth Ward and nine of us were accommodated on the First Floor. All was quiet on the 26th. On the 27th at 2.30 p.m. there was shouting around Youth Ward and armed prisoners scaled boundary walls and started to break open gates in the Youth ward. Nearly 40 prisoners armed with axes, swords, crowbars, iron pipes and wooden legs appeared before our door and started to break the lock. Dr.Rajasunderam walked up to the door and pleaded with them to spare us as we were not involved in any robberies or murders and as Hindus we did not believe in violence and as Buddhists they should not kill. The door suddenly opened and Dr.Rajasunderam was dragged out and hit with an iron rod on the head. He fell among the crowd. The rest of us broke the chairs and tables and managed to keep the crowd at bay for half an hour. The army arrived, threw tear gas bombs and dispersed the crowd. Then two soldiers lined up eight of us and were taking aim to shoot when the Commander called out from below to them to come down. Then the soldiers chased us down and all who escaped death were lined up on the footpath in front of the youth ward. As we walked out, we saw corpses of our colleagues around us and we heard (Sinhalese) prisoners shouting that it was a pity that we were allowed to live.

We were ordered to run into a mini-van and removed out of the prison compound and loaded into an army truck. We were ordered to lie face down on the floor of the truck and a few who raised their heads were trampled down by the soldiers. All along the way to the Katunayake airport some soldiers kept cursing the Tamils and Eelam and using obscene language. We were kept at the airport until early morning. We were refused even water. We were then taken into an Air Force plane , ordered to sit with our heads down until we reached Batticaloa airport. From there we



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were taken in an open van to Batticaloa prison. Here, we were received with sympathy and smiles. Hot tea was served to us. We felt we had returned to sanity and some measure of safety". - *(Tamil Times, November 1983)*

Another account, that of Mr.K.Devanandan, contained the following description.

> Giving the first eye-witness account of the Welikade massacres of July 25 and July 27, Mr.Devanandan said that but for the intervention of a Muslim army commander, none of the Tamil political prisoners would have survived. The July 25 massacre was conducted at 2.30 p.m. when Colombo was under total curfew. Air Force helicopters hovered over the jail when the killings took place inside, under the supervision of the deputy jail superintendent, aided and abetted by the army and security guards. The July 27 killings were led by Sepala Ekanayake, undergoing life imprisonment for hijacking an Alitalia plane on its flight from Delhi to Bangkok in July last year. Sinhalese prisoners convicted of murder, rape, and burglary charges were handpicked by the warders for the attack after plying them with liquor, Mr.Devanandan said. They came out of their cells shouting "Kottiya Maranda Ona" (Kill the Tigers)" - (Tamil Times, September-October 1983)

The *LAWASIA* report continued,

> The disturbances in Colombo gradually lessened on July 27th and July 28th. However, on Friday July 29th there was another bad outbreak of violence, and this time the violence was directed not only against property but also against people. Rumours began to spread that the Tigers had come to Colombo and were in the Fort and Pettah areas. (This is the business and commercial district of Colombo) The rumours spread rapidly

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> throughout the city. Within ten to fifteen minutes they had been heard ten miles away. People were said to have driven around in vans and travelled on bicycles, spreading the news. There was great panic, people were running and driving away from the city centre and the consequence was traffic jams and chaos. Violence erupted again. The violence on Friday July 29th was of horrifying proportions and I heard eye-witness accounts of terrible atrocities. Cars were stopped and this time if Tamils were in the cars they were burned inside them. Petrol was poured over people and they were set alight. People were also burned in their houses and were hacked to death.....

Author's note:

There was a touch of irony in the fact that Dr.Rajasunderam had to meet with a violent death when he tried to talk peace with his killers, while the rest of them – including the septuagenarian Dr.Tharmalingam – broke chairs and table legs and used them as weapons to defend themselves – and survived! Is there a moral in that for the Tamil people? Dr.Rajasunderam thought his knowledge of Sinhala would help, but in trying to speak in Gandhian terms, alas, he spoke the wrong lines to the wrong people. Pleading with the killers saying that they, the inmates, were not involved in robberies or murders – as Mr.David recalls – were the wrong things to say. The killers had no grouse with fellow men – even Tamils, who were convicted of robberies and murders. There were a number of Tamil convicts in that jail answering to that description, and they were not even touched. The ones they really hated were political detainees like Rajasunderam!

I had come to know Dr.Rajasunderam and his wife Dr.Shanthi during the period I edited the *Saturday Review* in Jaffna and valued their friendship. Once Dr.Rajasunderam came down from Vavuniya, took me to a corner of the office and gently chided me for not taking enough care about my safety. I was tickled by his earnestness, but he looked dead serious. "Don't laugh, I

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have to tell you something", he said. A Tamil youth from Vavuniya was held by the army for some reason or other, assaulted by a drunken lieutenant, and left to lie bleeding under the table. The officer was meanwhile bragging in Sinhala to a couple of soldiers in the room. "What is this talk of Eelam?" the boy heard him saying, "Let's catch this fellow Dr.Rajasunderam here, go to Jaffna and thrash that M.P. Yogeswaran and that Editor of that paper *Saturday Review*, and that is the end of this talk of Eelam!". Not used to taking myself too seriously, that indeed came to me as a kind of revelation. What turn of fate was it that the man who concerned himself about my safety was himself no more!

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"*From eye witness accounts, Kuttimani's eyes were gouged and his blood drunk by his attackers",* said Mr.David. There was an explanation for this macabre incident. One year before the Welikade massacres, Kuttimani, along with Jegan, was charged under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Denied trial by jury, they were sentenced to death by a trial judge. Before sentence of death was passed, the judge asked them whether they had anything to say. In the course of his statement from the dock, Kuttimani said – (in Tamil),

> The verdict of this court will provide impetus, fertile manure, and an encouragement and compelling reason for the establishment of Tamil Eelam. This will not be the only case. There will be other Tamil youths who will be brought to this court, on false charges. I request that I should be hanged in Tamil Eelam. I request that my vital organs be given to those in need of them. **I request that my eyes be donated to some blind person, so that Kuttimani will be able to see through those eyes the reality of Tamil Eelam.** I request that my body be given to the Medical Faculty of the University of Jaffna.

That of course explained that ghoulish behaviour, rarely heard of in civilized parts of the world. The allegations made by Mr.Devanandan

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were more specific. If indeed the Deputy Jail Superintendent was guilty of masterminding the massacres, the various officials who gave evidence at the magisterial inquiry were themselves guilty of covering up the truth of what happened. The government, true to form, showed no inclination to probe into allegations of complicity on the part of the prison staff.

Out of the 73 Tamil political prisoners, only 20 of them survived the two massacres. Among them were – the 75-year old Dr.S.A.Tharmalingam, S.A.David, Catholic priests Fr.Singarayar and Fr.Sinnarasa, Dr. W.T.Jeyakularajah, his brother Methodist priest Rev. Jayatilakarajah, Jaffna University lecturer M.Nithiananthan, Mrs.Nirmala Nithiananthan nee Rajasingham, *Suthanthiran* Editor Kovai Mahesan, and K.Devanandan.

**Racism triumphant** – Francis Wheelan, *New Statesman*, (Extract).

> Colombo- A few minutes after arriving in Sri Lanka last month, I was sitting on the pavement outside Katunayake airport, watching the birds and the dragonflies. A Sinhalese youth sat down beside me, apparently keen to talk about the recent violence against the country's Tamils. *"Tamils all gone from Colombo now"*, he said, with a broad grin, *"Tamil shops all burned. Perhaps all Tamil people will go to India now"*. His tone was gleefully triumphant. "*Sri Lanka is for Sinhalese people",* he concluded, though Tamils have lived in Sri Lanka for over two thousand years, at least as long as the Sinhalese.
>
> If one wishes to know where these Sinhalese youths get their ideas from, one need only look at Junius Richard Jayawardene, Sri Lanka's 77-year old President. On Thursday 28 July, while Sinhalese thugs rampaged around the streets of Colombo and many other towns, the President broadcast to the nation. He did not utter a single word of regret or sympathy for the Tamils who had been massacred or made homeless. Instead, the man who likes to think of himself as the grand old statesman of the

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Third World announced that "***the time has come to accede to the clamour and the national respect of the Sinhala people***", for all the world as if the Sinhalese were the victims.....

Attacks on Tamils in Trincomalee began several weeks before the eruption of violence in Colombo. By the time that Colombo started to burn, on the night of Sunday 24 July, there were already over 1,000 Tamils sheltering in nine refugee camps around Trincomalee. Many of them were so-called "Indian Tamils", descendants of the South Indians who were shipped over by the British in the 19th century to work on the coffee and tea estates. After fleeing from the tea estates at Ratnapura and Matale during the violence of 1977, they had settled in the village of Pankulam, just outside Trincomalee, where they erected simple mud huts and began to cultivate paddy. Two months ago, the Pankulam settlement was destroyed by gangs of air force volunteers.

**There then occurred an alarming and hitherto unreported incident. Late on the night of 24 July, armed police and air force men went to the Trincomalee refugee camps, accompanied by a convoy of 13 buses**. "*They came just after midnight*," according to an eye witness, "*and they told everyone to get into the buses. We asked what authority they had and where they were going, but they just waved their guns*". All but one of the nine camps were completely emptied in this way, and nearly a thousand Tamil refugees were then driven through the night to the towns of Nuwara Eliya and Badulla, nearly 200 miles away. In the morning they were dispersed around several estates and told to start picking tea.

Many of the refugees who were effectively kidnapped from the Trincomalee camps were stateless "Indian Tamils" from the

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Pankulam settlement.....The Government's dread of "Indian" Tamils moving away from the tea estates is well illustrated by the official treatment of the Gandhiyam Society. This charitable organisation set up a number of settlements around the northern town of Vavuniya in 1977 and helped to rehabilitate the hundreds of Indian Tamils who had fled from the violence in the hill country. Gandhiyam taught these refugees simple methods of cultivation and irrigation; it helped them to build huts; it set up schools and medical centres.

The authorities watched all these with mounting alarm and in April this year arrested Gandhiyam's two leaders, Dr.Somasunderam Rajasunderam and Mr.S.A.David, under the Prevention of Terrorism Act – which allows suspects to be held for up to 18 months without being charged. They were both tortured in army camps before being transferred to Welikade prison in Colombo. There, at the end of July, Dr.Rajasunderam was one of the 54 Tamil prisoners massacred in their cells by **a small army of commandos, prison officers and Sinhalese prisoners.**

Of course the government has hotly denied that prison officers – let along commandos from outside – took part in the massacre at Welikade jail. The official, account is that a group of Sinhalese prisoners got "out of control" and set upon the Tamils; that the prison staff tried in vain to stop them. This has been accepted uncritically by the Sri Lankan newspapers, despite the rather obvious flaw in the official explanation: Welikade is a maximum security prison and most of the Tamils who were killed were supposedly dangerous guerrillas. The idea that Sinhalese prisoners could amble into the cells and beat 54 of them to death without official cooperation beggars belief. But, in any case, I have received accounts from people in the

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jail which made it clear that the massacre was conducted with the support of the authorities – with the notable exception of the prison's superintendent, who is now to be transferred.

**The apparently limitless Sinhalese capacity for self-delusion these days is also exemplified by the story I was told by a number of people in Colombo: these people "knew for a fact" that the Jaffna public library which was destroyed in 1981, had been burnt down by the "Tigers", a Tamil guerrilla group in the north. In fact it has long been established beyond doubt that the police were the culprits. But the Sinhalese cannot allow themselves to admit such things, and their terror of the Tigers is such that they are more than willing to credit the group with anything ..." -** Francis Wheen, *New Statesman*, London, 16 September, 1983.

**The Ghost Island: Liberation Tigers to hit back,** *The Week,* India (Extract)

*Ash on an old man's sleeve*

*Is all the ash the burnt roses leave*

*Dust in the air suspended*

*Marks the place where a story ended"*

-T.S.Elliot

The story has not ended, it has just begun. Yes, scabs are forming over the sores, the rubble on the battled streets of the ravaged capital is disappearing, a ghostly peace is peeping in. But how long will this unreal calm last?

The old man with the face of an emotionless Roman statue sitting in his presidential mansion in Colombo would have the

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benumbed world believe that the blood-spattered pearl of the Indian ocean is limping back to normal even as he was making a virtual declaration of war against one million Tamils of the island. He is right, partly. The island is limping, whether its destination be peace or a full-scale war, and the grievous limp is there to remain for years to come.....

**The Tamils have been pushed into a tight corner and it is only a matter of time before the Tigers re-align themselves overcoming differences within, and strike back with deadly results.** As a foreign diplomat in Colombo said, it needs only a few hundred machine-guns to wipe off the meagre Sri Lankan forces. Such an eventuality would be more devastating than the death and destruction wrought by the riots of July which the Jayawardene government dismally failed to control. Already, in the refugee camps where thousands of uprooted Tamils have sought asylum, mothers filled with the fanatic Dravidian nationalism are asking their young sons to avenge their murdered brethren. The indignities they suffered at the hands of the ravaging Sinhala mobs and the inhuman conditions in the refugee camps have inflamed the passions of the people who till two weeks ago were living in prosperous homes.

There are 17 refugee camps in Colombo city alone, sheltering more than 50,000 homeless Tamils, and an equal number of refugees are housed in barbed wire fenced camps all over the country. In the largest refugee camp at Ratmalana, which was the site of the old Colombo airport, are huddled 17,000 Tamils without even the basic necessities. The camps are filthy, stinking and without adequate toilets and water.....

To feed the refugees, the government has to have 800 tonnes of rice a month, 140 tonnes of flour, 38 tonnes of sugar, 80 tonnes

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of fish, 55 tonnes of potatoes, 102 tonnes of chillies, and spices, 30 tonnes of powdered milk, and 28 tonnes of pulses apart from mounds of butter and cheese, according to a quick official estimate. Even then, what the refugees get will be iron rations. Contributions to the relief fund are slow in coming from within the country mainly because the general attitude of the Sinhalese to the plight of the Tamils is of little or no concern. While a few Tamils fleeing from the violence had stories of good Sinhala Samaritans to tell, most of the Sinhalese who did not take part in the Tamil hunt had closed their doors on their faces. Said a girl without any touch of pity: "*Only the Tamils are affected. We don't bother*". The attitude of the majority community is unfortunate, especially since the Sinhalese are traditionally very generous people. .....

One of the houses burnt in the Sinhala violence belonged to the editor of *Virakesari* which is owned by Indian tennis star Vijay Amritharaj's father-in-law Wenceslaus. The editor took refuge in the house of Wenceslaus who himself was on the lam and was hiding in a hotel. The newspaper building was however left untouched by the rioters although earlier reports had stated that the building was burnt down. Not many people knew why the *Virakesari* building was spared by the rampaging mobs. It was not an oversight on the part of the rioters but a deliberate omission. Sri Lankan President was born in that building and the rioters knew well that burning it would be sacrilegious. Jayawardene has been trying to get the building back for some time now.

However, the calm in Jaffna is disquieting. Emotions run powerful there, the Tamil militancy being as strong as the brand of tobacco the Jaffnaites produce in their plantations. Even the most pacifist of the Tamils are now convinced that there is no

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alternative to the creation of a separate state for Tamils now that they have found the ugliness of the Sinhala fanaticism unbelievably horrifying. The Tamils are idealistic and clannish, typical of Dravidians, and the fiery slogans of the Tigers are attracting more and more young boys in their teens to the path of armed struggle. An Indian journalist who toured Jaffna just before the outbreak of the riots asked his host where he could meet some Tigers and the answer was ***"you have already met them"***

**Members of the Sri Lankan armed forces are jittery at the five-letter word "Tiger" which spells terror for them**. When a rumour spread in Colombo during the riots that some Tigers had arrived from Jaffna in military uniforms and were sniping at the soldiers from rooftops, there was a virtual stampede by the patrolling armymen who ran helter-skelter. They started firing at anyone in military uniforms and when shooting stopped they found that most of them who lay dead were their fellow soldiers. The streets were cluttered with 30 bodies of soldiers and many civilians….."Cover Story, *THE WEEK*, a Malayala Manorama publication, India, August 21-2 Patrick Jonas, with V.S.Jayachandran and Krishna in Colombo.

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# Chapter 18

## September 1983 : Escape from Jaffna and a midnight passage to India

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# September 1983 : Escape from Jaffna and a midnight passage to India

By the time the grim chapter of July 1983 ended, President Jayawardene's image in the world outside had reached rock bottom. But worse was the morale of the Sri Lankan army after the Tinnevely ambush. What was until then a hit-and-run exercise by "the boys" had taken the form of a meticulously planned surprise attack. Strangely enough, it was a planned ambush by the army that recoiled on them. Under the direction of Brigadier J.G.Balthazar, who was in charge at Gurunagar army camp, an army detachment code-named "Four Four Charlie" was to lie in wait to trap one of the most wanted men of the time – Sellakili – about whose movements in the Tinnevely area the army had come to know. But one hour before that, another army detachment code-named "Four Four Bravo" was sent on a routine patrol with instructions to look out for any suspicious movements on Palaly Road near Tinnevely. Alas, it was this convoy consisting of a jeep and a truck that became the victim of the LTTE ambush. The spot on the road chosen by the Tigers for the planned ambush had been dug up for installing telecommunication equipment which would necessitate any passing vehicle to slow down. The man who master-minded the ambush was Sellakili himself – he was one step ahead of the army – but ironically enough the army achieved their target. Despite losing 13 of their soldiers they got their man. The ambush was a success, but Sellakili was dead.

With Pirabakaran overseeing the plan, along with Kittu (Sathasivam Krishnakumar) others who took part in the ambush were among those to become later heroes and martyrs of the LTTE – Victor, Pulendran, and

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Santhosam. Sellakili who had been a close associate of Pirabakaran from early days was also involved in an earlier ambush – that of the killing of police investigator Inspector Bastiampillai in a hide-out at Murunkan. It was later stated by Kittu that the only time he saw Pirabakaran sobbing was when they discovered the body of Sellakili. Only a month earlier he had lost another hardened lieutenant in Chares Lucas Anthony (Seelan), one of his early comrades from Trincomalee. He was to lose many more of his able commanders as the liberation struggle proceeded, but such was the fierce motivation behind the Tiger movement that there was always a crop of new faces, younger men, and latterly young women, who were to distinguish themselves in battle – thus fulfilling the Tiger claim: *We don't bury our heroes. We* ***plant*** *them!* (For an in-depth version of the ambush and the Kanatte burial leading to the riots see *T.D.S.A.Dissanayaka's THE AGONY OF SRI LANKA, Swastika Press, 329, Dam Street, Colombo 12)*

While Colombo and the rest of the island was caught up in the biggest vortex of violence in history the situation in Jaffna itself was grim. The Tinnevely ambush made some army men from the Mathagal camp go into a frenzy. They commandeered a mini bus and went about shooting every civilian on sight at Chankanai, Sandilipay, Pandetheruppu and Manipay. At least fiftyone people were mowed down that same day, including some students waiting at a bus stop at Manipay. The Tigers had meanwhile put up posters in Jaffna town by 11 a.m. claiming responsibility for the ambush in retaliation for the raping of three girls by army men in Valvettititurai earlier that week. The Jaffna bazaar was deserted. Shops were closed, buses had stopped plying and life had come to a standstill.

In Colombo, life was reportedly quiet for most part of the day, it being Sunday and Esala Poya Day, a day sacred to the Buddhists. The news of the Jaffna ambush had been late in coming. But by evening, parts of Colombo were in the grip of tension, and anti-Tamil violence had begun to surface. A 10,000 strong mob had gathered at the Kanatte Cemetery waiting for the bodies of the thirteen army men and a near-riot ensued, the anger turning

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against the government. The planned funeral was abandoned, and by 10 p.m. attacks on Tamil-owned buildings had begun. By September, the whole country was licking its wounds, while Tamils fled the island by their thousands, to India, and to any country in the West that would give them refuge. But there was no settling down for me.

Came September 15 and that police bell push on my door. I took *Saturday Review* councillor "K" into confidence. Together we weighed the pros and cons behind my summons to the 4th Floor of Police Headquarters in Colombo. After all, the paper was already banned and the office sealed. So many momentous events had happened in the country meanwhile. Was it delayed action? On the encouraging side was the fact that there was nothing that could have prevented them from picking me straightaway and hauling me to Colombo, as they did to *Suthanthiran* editor Kovai Mahesan, but they didn't. Hopefully, they might interrogate me, twist my arms a little, derive some kick out of it, and considering my age and position let me go. But a fat hope it was. Did they respect the age of the 70 odd year old Dr.Tharmalingam? On the other hand, under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, a mere entry that they "suspect" me of "terrorist links" was enough to keep me incommunicado for eighteen months. I had no desire to be a mere martyr, nor vegetate in prison, becoming useless both to the cause and to my family; nor for that matter, knowing my provocative ways get pushed to death from the 4th Floor, nor like my friend Dr.Rajasunderam get battered to death within a high security prison. No, flee to India and live to fight another day, was the only safe option.

A small "council of war" was set up and a secret plan was hatched. A seat was booked in my name in one of those Jaffna-Colombo night buses (the name of the bus was "Pillayar Vilas") and a dummy was arranged to travel on that seat instead. *Saturday Review* lawyer S.Nadesan, Q.C. – who was to argue the case against the ban on the paper and was to ask the police to produce me before court - - was told that I would be arriving in Colombo on Tuesday morning to keep my rendezvous with the C.I.D. Gamini Navaratne

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too was informed accordingly. Regretfully, that was an unfortunate deception that had to be practised on both of them. Except my wife and my two young daughters and my wife's maternal Uncle Shadah, no one else was taken into confidence. There was a steady stream of visitors at home who offered me sympathy and courage on my "impending visit to Colombo's 4th Floor". It was a ticklish situation keeping a straight face and accepting their well-meant expressions of concern.

Came that evening of the supposed departure to Colombo, and I was instead whisked away (after a change of car on the way) to the safe house of a friend, Senthur, at Thunnalai on the northern coast. From there, I was to await intimation of the earliest boat that was to take me to India. Only two of the militant groups, the LTTE and TELO had boat movements to India at that time, but it was TELO that ran boats with greater frequency. There was no rivalry between groups then, and I was advised to take the first boat available. While at Senthur's house, a visitor called, whom Senthur introduced as "Sri". The visitor mentioned that he had even called at the *Saturday Review* office once and had seen me, but I could not remember. Before leaving, he told me "Bala Annai" had come to Madras, and I could meet him there. The "Bala Annai" he referred to was of course Anton Balasingam. Much later in Madras I ran into the "Sri" whom I had met at Thunnalai only to discover that he was no other than "Mahattaya" (Mahendrarajah)!

In Madras, I was to learn of what happened at the Colombo end. CID Headquarters, perturbed about my non-arrival had radioed Jaffna CID office that I should be taken in and brought to Colombo. It was a testing time for my wife again who had to keep a straight face and tell them (quite truthfully anyway) that I was booked in on the "Pillayar Vilas" night bus to Colombo on Monday night. Inquiries with the bus office revealed that the said person was occupant of seat No. 5 and had indeed travelled to Colombo. Meanwhile, Gamini Navaratne had made inquiries at CID Headquarters and was told that I hadn't reported as expected; which Gamini was not prepared to believe. Inquiries at the houses of my close relatives in Colombo also drew a blank.

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Gamini's fear was that I was somehow taken in on arrival and was being kept incommunicado at the 4th Floor. He decided to raise an alarm. As Colombo correspondent for the *Times of India,* he sent a despatch to that paper to say that in answering the summons of the CID, I had "disappeared". The *Sunday Island* in its centre page political gossip column speculated that the "northern scribe" had left the bus at Vavuniya, gone to Talaimannar and taken boat to India! Not quite there, but true enough up to a point.

Used as I was, for the better part of my life, to "crossing bridges as they come", crossing the Palk Strait by midnight, in an open country craft, at the age of 54, seemed an adventure with a vengeance. Along with me in the boat, fitted with three motors, manned by a 2-man crew, were nine to ten boys, all going for arms training to India. They were early days, but the sea trek had begun. The moon was up that September night, which made the sea water shine with a hard, cold, glassy brilliance. The splash of the waves on both sides of the boat soaked me through and through. No one spoke. There was a pensive silence. There was nothing to do but take off one's shirt, (to avoid getting spotted by Sri Lankan navy boats), shut one's eyes, close one's ears to keep the cold out, shiver a little, and think of the family and the home soil that one was leaving behind, and in some way, think of the future too. But what future? That was an uncertain one and a total blank. I had just enough Indian money promised at the other end and a thick gold bangle that my wife gave me that could enable me to survive in some cheap Indian lodge for some months. But as a diabetic and living alone in alien surroundings, life could be hard. I tried to recall to memory two previous trips to India: the first, during the sixties during my *Daily Mirror* days as an invitee on the Indian Airlines inaugural Colombo-Trivandrum flight; the second, in the seventies as a delegate from the Ceylon Tourist Board to a South Asian Tourism Conference at the Ashoka Hotel in Bangalore; being garlanded along with other delegates on arrival at Madras airport; flown to Bangalore as guest of the Indian tourism authorities. And here I was, in the eighties, once an honoured guest, now a "kallathoni"! Oh, what revenges do the whirligigs of Time bring!.

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The India of late 1983 to which I went through the backyard of Kodikkarai was of course not the India of temples and tourism. It was a country that was becoming second home to over one lakh of Tamil refugees; and a training ground for thousands of militant youths, not only in Tamil Nadu, but in the foothills of northern Uttar Pradesh – courtesy the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). What an innocuous name! The leadership of the Tamil United Liberation Front having long lost its taste for "liberation", discredited by the emerging youth militancy and marginalized in the political process, also found a safe haven in Tamil Nadu. The Sixth Amendment to the Constitution rushed through in parliament in early August made an anti-secession oath obligatory, and this had cost them their seats in the Sri Lankan parliament. Not that the TULF stood for secession any more, with its leader Appapillai Amirthalingam himself enjoying political glory as the country's Leader of the Opposition since 1977. Forgetting one's label and the people's mandate is one thing, but to be called upon to disown them in public is quite another.

Contrary to popular belief that India's active interest in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka came about in the wake of the July '83 holocaust, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had been keeping a suspicious watch on her southern neighbour for quite some time. Junius Richard J (nicknamed "Yankee Dick") was clearly taking the country away from a policy of non-alignment in the context of the Cold War of that time. What was more, he was trying to take the country away from the orbit of Indian influence. Even the fear of an Indian invasion was very much in the minds of the Sinhalese long before 1983. It used to be widely rumoured in Colombo that Mrs.Gandhi had even asked her military command to work out a "game plan" and estimate the number of army battalions and air squadrons that would be required to take over the entire island within 24 hours! My mind went back to one evening (was it 1979?) when I was Editor (Publications) in the Tourist Board. I was seated at the old Tourist Board office verandah overlooking the hockey field at Galle Face, having a casual chat with two or three fellow officers and the Hotel Corporation Chairman, the ebullient Nimalasiri Silva. Suddenly, we heard the drone of a helicopter landing on the hockey field opposite. That was

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something unusual. "Not an Indian army helicopter?", queried one of them jocularly. Nimalasiri turned to me and said in equal fun-mood: "In that case, let us start by giving Siva a good thrashing". That revealed an interesting insight into the Sinhala mind – the tendency to associate all Tamils in the country with India. Perhaps there was some justification for it. While the Sinhalese preferred to forget, if not deny, their Indian ancestry, the Tamils continued to look upon India as their mother country.

What could be termed as India's blatant interference in Sri Lanka's internal affairs happened **five days before the July rioting began;** a significant episode that was hardly remembered in the light of the more critical events that overtook it. The Sri Lanka High Commissioner Bernard Tillekeratne was summoned to the Foreign Office by the secretary in charge of the Sri Lankan desk Shankar Bajpai, and was told about **India's concern about happenings in Jaffna!** Particular reference was made to the emergency regulations that were operative in Jaffna permitting disposal of dead bodies without inquest. A surprised Sri Lankan envoy ventured to ask whether the "concern" was conveyed from Tamil Nadu? No, he was told, the expression of concern came from the *"highest political level"*. Understandably from their point of view, the Sri Lankan Press went into virtual hysterics on the 21st July, accusing India of meddling in the internal affairs of the country. BIG BROTHER, SHUT UP was one of the screaming headlines in one of the dailies.

What made Mrs.Gandhi pick on those emergency regulations, obnoxious as they were, at that point of time? Was Jayawardene setting the stage for a massive onslaught on Jaffna? That he had a deep-seated grudge against Jaffna was well-known, as when he told Ian Ward of the *Daily Telegraph*, London, on July 10: ***"I'm not worried about the Jaffna people now. We cannot think of them, not about their lives, or of their opinion about us".*** Jaffna was a sensitive spot from India's point of view as well, separated as it was by only a few miles of water from Tamil Nadu, and having close ethnic, cultural and religious links with that part of India. Whether a planned onslaught on

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Jaffna got deflected into a wider all-island cataclysm could at best be only a historical conjecture. But what could be said with certainty is that the honour of predetermining the political agenda of the whole country had passed from the hands of successive Sinhalese governments **into the hands of one man, Velupillai Prabhakaran, - with that Jaffna ambush of July 23.**

We landed in knee-deep water off Kodikkarai, the closest point between Valvettiturai and the Indian mainland. In dim moonlight, in slow motion, we walked in silence in Indian file through what seemed a long sandy stretch. I brought up the rear with a boy in front carrying my bag. It would have looked an impressive stage tableau had someone photographed it in black and white, in light and shade! After a 10-minute walk, I spied two dim figures at the distance. That was the welcoming party. I was in safe hands. After a hot cup of tea at a house which I was told belonged to a DMK legislator, there was a non-stop travel by bus to Thanjavur and thereafter to Madras. The boy in charge seemed to know his way around, deposited me in a lodge in Egmore and said if any questions were asked, I should say I was from Salem in South India. Could be that people in Salem spoke Tamil the way we do. Next day, as promised he brought me the Indian money. And thus, the next chapter in my life began.

A growing realisation in me that some unseen hand had begun to order my life was confirmed within one week of my arrival in Madras. Whatever feelings I had of an uncertain future ahead of me were laid to rest when I found that an assignment was waiting for me. *Saturday Review* was not going to be the end of the story. K.Kanthasamy, who was a marked man in Colombo, had managed to escape the clutches of the police and had landed in London. A fast worker, he impressed funding bodies with his earnestness and selfless dedication and soon set up the Tamil Information Centre in London. A branch in Madras was his next objective. After all, Tamil Nadu was now going to be the hub of Eelam Tamil activity in the post-1983 situation. Apart from the youth militants seeking arms training and TULF politicians debarred from parliament by the Sixth Amendment finding succour in India, Tamil Nadu

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was getting flooded with refugees of all kinds. Kantha had already arranged for premises to be rented out at a Madras suburb called Mahalingapuram.

Meanwhile, S.C.Chandrahasan had set up his own base in Madras. As a son of the late Tamil leader S.J.V.Chelvanayakam and son-in-law of another Tamil leader Dr.E.M.V.Naganathan he had not only the right credentials but also had shown greater political motivation than his elders in the TULF. He was fortunate in many respects, not the least of which was his secretary- an efficient, devoted young woman who was to become both his eyes and ears in the course of his later political activity in Madras. My own association with him began in Colombo. While working in a Government Corporation, the Ceylon Tourist Board, I took the risk of assisting him in preparing material to further the cause. One of our joint ventures was the publication of a weekly – the *Sansoni Commission Evidence*, which I edited. It was printed at the *Suthanthiran* Press, and we ran the publication for an year. It was Kantha again who had arranged three lawyers, Leslie Bartlett, Manivasagam Underwood and Rudramoorthy to lead evidence from witnesses about the 1977 anti-Tamil rioting. The one-man Commissioner Waldo Sansoni disappointed the Tamils by his Government-slanted report, and this publication – the *Sansoni Commission Evidence* - was **the only complete source of first-hand information about the various killings, and indignities heaped on the Tamil people during the riots.** Whether the rich Tamil expatriates who had not shown any interest in recording the history of their own people will help to maintain such publications in the Tamil Eelam archives is yet to be seen.

When Indian Prime Minister ordered RAW to start arms training for Eelam Tamil youths, it was to Chandrahasan that the Indian agents turned. In fact, the RAW man in the Indian High Commission in Colombo had been already cultivating him. With the TELO leaders like Thangathurai, Kuttimani and Jegan being massacred at Welikade, the group's leadership passed on to Sri Sabaratnam, a mild-mannered man with no serious political ambitions. Chandrahasan took him under his wing, introduced him to the RAW functionaries and also took him to DMK leader Karunanidhi who

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took a liking to him. Tamil youths whose only fancy was to learn to handle weapons were soon picked up in Jaffna and sent by boatloads to India. Unlike the LTTE, TELO showed no discrimination in the way they added to their numbers. The People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) headed by Pirabakaran's erstwhile comrade Uma Maheswaran (*alias* Mukunthan) The Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS) founded by Elayathamby Ratnasabapathy, and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), a break-away from EROS and led by the bearded K.Padmanabha had all got their act together by this time, but with varying agendas and guided by the personal proclivities of their leaders. While Padmanabha was a genuine revolutionary and Ratnasabapathy an amiable but a half-baked one, Uma Maheswaran also liked to toy with Marxism but with no real conviction. He was really a surveyor with a TULF background. As for the LTTE and the TELO they were guided by pure Tamil nationalist impulses. It was an assorted bunch of young men but nevertheless inspired by an inner fire. Tamil Nadu welcomed all of them with open arms.

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# Chapter 19

## 1983-1984: Eelam activity in Madras, state of war in Sri Lanka

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# 1983-1984: Eelam activity in Madras, state of war in Sri Lanka

Getting about in Tamil Nadu without knowing a soul is no big deal for an Eelam Tamil. One gets to merge with the crowd without being noticed. But existing there in anonymity was surely not the purpose of my being there. I was armed with one Madras address however, that of a DMK lawyer who was a supporter of the Tamil cause. It was when I traced him at his home that I came to know about the presence of Chandrahasan. His secretary was already running a low-profile office from a hotel room, co-ordinating with RAW officers the arms training programme for the TELO militants. She beamed with astonishment at seeing me, and it was while chatting with her that her phone rang. At the other end was none other than Kanthasamy speaking from London. Kantha was not a man to waste words or waste time. He gave me the address of a house in Mahalingapuram, already rented out and earmarked to house the office of the Tamil Information Centre. "Move in there immediately", he said, "There is a living room for you, a kitchen and cook, set up an office, and draw up a work programme. There is a man to manage the place and he will look after your needs". Not a word about how I surfaced in Madras!. So there it was, that hidden hand of fate again, ordering my life for me!

Mahalingapuram was a quiet suburb of Madras, and the rented house was itself tucked away down an unobtrusive alley. But the Tamil Information Centre (TIC) soon became the focal point and meeting place of the increasing number of middle class refugees who were making Madras their temporary home. Everyone who had anything to do with the Eelam Tamil struggle,

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including the militant groups, had made Madras their base. Tamil Nadu itself was seething with sympathy for the Eelam Tamils. Led by the DMK, political parties, trade Unions, professional bodies, cinema stars were all vying with each other in organising processions and demonstrating their support for their Tamil brethren in Sri Lanka. Pazha Nedumaran, then leader of the Kamaraj Congress Party and who was to play a dynamic role on behalf of Eelam Tamils and the LTTE in later years organised a "sacrifice march" to Sri Lanka. He attempted to cross the Palk Strait with more than 1000 volunteers in a fleet of boats to protect their Tamil brethren, he claimed. Wide publicity was given in the Madras Press, and although it was meant to be a symbolic act, President Jayawardene got rattled and urged the government of India to stop the march. Someone else thought of an interesting idea to collect money for the helpless refugees housed in camps. On the road to the Meenambakkam airport there was an effigy of Jayawardene with anti-Sinhalese slogans beside which was a worn-out shoe. Passers- by were invited to have a go at the effigy and leave whatever donations they could to help the refugees!

In my own office at the Tamil Information Centre, I was getting a stream of visitors. Among the early callers were Indian journalists, among whom was Anita Pratap in jeans leading her young son. She was working for the Calcutta-based *Sunday* magazine at that time. There was Paul Sieghart from London, on his way to Colombo to report for the International Commission of Jurists. He told me he was going there as a guest of President Jayawardene, but meanwhile he would like to meet any survivors of the Welikade massacre and hear their version of what happened. I arranged for Dr.Jeyakularajah and *Suthanthiran* editor Kovai Mahesan to meet him. On his return from Colombo, he authored the publication *Sri Lanka – A Mounting Tragedy of Errors*. There was Balu Mahendra, the well-known cinematographer from Batticaloa who had made Madras his home. He was fascinated with the theme of making a film out of the Batticaloa jail escape, with Nirmala Nithianandan as the central figure. Nothing came out of it anyway. One visitor who was to become the cause of a political furore was Shekhar Gupta, who was an investigative writer for the fortnightly publication, *India Today*. He was, as I was to learn

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later, a specialist writer on insurgencies. His mission, he explained, was to do an in-depth feature on the post-'83 situation and the responses of the various militant organisations, as well as other leading personalities who were living in Madras. Could I help in arranging interviews with them, he asked?

I saw no reason why I should not oblige a fellow journalist, but I told him that we at the TIC, could act only as a kind of post office. I was not in a position to give the whereabouts of any of the groups but I would certainly pass on his request to all the groups concerned, and it was left to them to contact him at his hotel number and fix up any interviews. I could not however give him any guarantees, I said, whether they would meet him or talk to him. He said it was okay by him and he left. I did not see him for the next two weeks. One day, Shekhar Gupta turned up, thanked me profusely for the help I had given him, and sat down to discuss our own work at the TIC. When the issue of *India Today* appeared, I was surprised seeing the kind of boastful responses given by some of the militant groups, and indeed by their lack of discretion in revealing even the locations of their training camps in Tamil Nadu. Earlier, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi when questioned in the Lok Sabha had denied the existence of arms training in Tamil Nadu. There were only refugee camps, she had said. And here were these men giving names of places where they had their respective training bases! Prime Minister Premadasa in Colombo saw in this issue of *India Today* a propagandist gold mine! The government of Sri Lanka ordered several thousands of reprint copies of the magazine, and had them distributed through their embassies in several world capitals to prove how India was hosting in her own soil training camps for Tamil insurgents. It also meant that the Indian Prime Minister was not truthful in what she said. Part of the blame came to me as well, particularly because Shekhar Gupta had given a flattering one-page account of my own work at the TIC, complete with photograph!

It was on one of those evenings I had a visitor whom I had known well during my *Saturday Review* days. He was the young Catholic priest, Fr. Sinnarasa, a survivor of the Welikade jail massacres.(*He was to give up his*

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*robes later*). He said there was someone who was anxious to see me. He would come back later in a car around 7.30 p.m. Would I come? Sure, I said. It was not until we drove up to that house at San Thome that I found that the person I was meeting was Anton Stanislaus Balasingham, the man who was to play a pivotal role in the LTTE's political activities in the years to come. With him in the house was his wife Adele and a stocky person whom I later came to know was "Baby" Subramaniam, a pioneering LTTE activist in Tamil Nadu. We all sat down to a fairly frugal sandwich dinner while discussing matters of the moment. In the course of the conversation, Bala popped the question in Tamil: "Now that you are here, why don't you come and work with us?". I explained to him that I would prefer to stick to the role of a journalist, and my political sympathies towards the LTTE could be better served outside the organisation than within it, and besides I was already committed to Kantha in running the TIC. He understood, and we parted in all friendliness.

Among other visitors at Mahalingapuram was that eminent Queen's counsel, S.Nadesan, who was the lawyer representing the *Saturday Review.* In paying a tribute to him after his death three years later, I wrote:

> I was to meet Mr.Nadesan ...on January 6, 1984, but in Madras. A friend phoned to say that Mr.Nadesan was in Madras on a private visit and was anxious to see me. I volunteered to go wherever he was, immediately. No, said my friend, Mr.Nadesan insists on coming there himself. And he came, accompanied by my friend, and his grandson, carrying a marketing bag! Seeing him without dentures, and with sunken cheeks, distressed me, but he beamed at me even as he walked in and stretched his hand. "I have come to meet that brilliant editor I am trying to defend", he said, full of mirth. The next one hour he insisted on telling me, chuckling all the time, how the Saturday Review case was proceeding, and how he was keeping on reading in Court large chunks of what I had written, and testing the patience

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of the judges. "I have to establish the policy of the paper you know, and how do I do it without quoting from the editorials?". "And you know," he said, switching to mock seriousness, "I can understand why the poor judges (he mentioned two of them by name) were squirming. What you write can sometimes be very biting!". And he laughed again. It was on that mischievous note that he left me. That was the last I saw of him. (*Tamil Times, January 1987*)

Shortly after that, the five-judge Bench of Sri Lanka Supreme Court gave their verdict. Under the headline – JUDGES PAY COMPLIMENT TO *SATURDAY REVIEW*, the *Tamil Times* of January 1984 carried the following news item:-

> Although a five-judge Bench of the Sri Lankan Supreme Court disallowed the application in which the publishers of the Jaffna-based weekly sought a reversal of the ban on the paper on grounds of infringement of fundamental rights, Justice R.S.Wanasundara who delivered judgement said:... ."Making allowance for the regional interest and approach of the publication, the publishers have tried to be as objective as possible, and have sought to produce **a weekly newspaper which appears to be a cut above the average newspaper judged by journalisic standards**....
>
> Justice Wanasundara went on to say: "Some of the material in the *Saturday Review* may not be palatable to the government or to the majority of the people in this country, but that by itself is no reason for imposing a sanction on this paper if the fundamental freedom of free speech has any worthwhile meaning.
>
> Unfortunately, there has also crept into this publication some material that must necessarily attract attention. Mr.Nadesan

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himself admitted that one of the objects followed by the publishers was to highlight the grievances of the Tamil people by laying bare the atrocities and excesses of the police and the armed services. It is apparent that full vein has been given to this subject.

It cannot also be gainsaid that this publication being intimately concerned with the aspirations of the Tamil community and under pressures from public opinion in the North, has in its general editorial policy, found that it could not help incline towards the radical groups waging a struggle against the State.

**It has, at times, if not explicitly, eulogised the terrorists and praised the sacrifices they have made**. Whether or not this material would pass muster in normal times need not concern us now. But in the present context, I cannot say that the competent authority was so unreasonable or wrong when he was of the view.... *"this editorial policy was, in the context of the circumstances prevailing in the country at the time the two impugned orders were made, and to date, extremely prejudicial to the security and safety of the country and its citizens.*

To be told that the editor of a weekly paper with limited resources could be such a danger to "*the security and safety of the country and its citizens*" may not sound as within the realms of plausibility. But at least one could take heart from the fact that it also meant an indirect compliment to the power of the pen!

Came November of that year, and the attention of many of us huddled in Madras switched to New Delhi where the Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting (CHOGM) was to take place. We were all there, TULF M.P.s M.Sivasithamparam, V.N.Navaratnam, some leaders of militant groups, fellow Tamil activists and at least two journalists from Sri Lanka, Iqbal Athas and Sinha Ranatunga. The last two called on me at my Madras

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office later. I had by that time brought out three publications, one of which titled "***Dear Sri Lanka Ambassador: Your slip is showing***" was to earn considerable attention. It was a 24-page booklet, and a reply to a Sri Lankan propaganda brochure authored by Ernest Corea, the country's ambassador in the U.S.

*The Telegraph*, Calcutta, edited by M.J.Akbar, had a long report about this in its issue of November 21, 1983, sent by the paper's Madras Correspondent. Under the headline –**Tamil booklet grills Lanka envoy to U.S**, it said,

> Madras, Nov.20: The Tamil Information Centre (TIC), based in London, has brought out a publication entitled, *Dear Sri Lanka Ambassador ...Your slip is showing,* which exposes the "white lies and half-truths" about the Sri Lankan Tamil problem as propagated by the Sri Lankan ambassador to the US, Mr.Ernest Corea. Mr.Corea had in a brochure , *Sri Lanka, beyond conflict,* explained the core of the Sri Lankan crisis: an explanation which has obviously angered Tamil sympathisers. The brochure was widely circulated at the UN conference recently. The TIC booklet will be circulated to the delegates of the Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting (CHOGM) to enlist support against Mr.Corea's views. Mr.S.Sivanayagam, head of the Tamil Eelam Information Unit and a former editor of the *Saturday Review* (now banned by the Sri Lanka government) explains in the preface of the TIC booklet, "*a greater alertness is necessary on the part of the reader, to guard not only against untruths but also against half-truths, wilful omissions, distortions and misleading impressions being sold to him under the sugar coating of reason. This is particularly necessary when the subject involves human lives, human suffering, continuing human rights violations and the future fate of millions of Tamils, as well as Sinhalese.* The 24-page booklet systematically demolishes Mr.Corea's thesis....."

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In Delhi, along with that tireless Tamil campaigner, M.K.Eelaventhan, I hired a "sardarji"s three-wheeler, went round diplomatic missions at Chanakyapuri – including the Sri Lankan High Commission at some personal risk, - leaving packets of various publications including that reply to Mr.Corea. We were to learn later that this particular booklet had reached not only the conference tables of the visiting heads of governments, but had also landed on Mr.Corea's lap at Washington. It gained further publicity in UN and government circles when a Tamil activist in New York made reprints of it and had it circulated. Mr.Corea's response, as expected, was very curt. Asked by the Lake House correspondent in the U.S., T.M.Deen, he said: *"I do not believe either in polemics or propaganda. I will not dignify the polemics and propaganda which splatter the pages of this particular literary curiosity with a reply". (Daily News,* Colombo, Nov.24, 1983) Of course, there was no room for a reply, and nothing much was heard of Mr.Corea thereafter.

By early 1984, I was getting unhappy with the goings-on at the Mahalingapuram office building. The man entrusted by Kantha to manage the place – a briefless lawyer from Colombo whom Kantha used to run errands for him – was utilising much of the money on running the kitchen and hosting his cronies. There was not enough money to continue with publications. The place itself was becoming a centre of intrigue, with a prominent Tamil businessman trying to build up a TULF-PLOTE combine against other groups. Uma Maheswaran, I found was a regular secret night visitor, and there were hush-hush meetings. Kantha was a man who believed in accounting to funding bodies the last penny he received from them. He decided to withdraw any more financial support to the Mahalingapuram set-up and suggested that I shift the office to another address. In May 1984, I rented out premises at Besant Nagar and expanded our work with a large staff and regular publications. To get over registration problems we also renamed ourselves as Tamil Information and Research Unit (TIRU).

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At Mahalingapuram, the documentation that I had painstakingly built up, along with the furniture, was irretrievably lost, and once the three months rent advance was exhausted, the place folded up, with the spoils being shared among a few PLOTE hangers-on. The end also came with a daring daylight act of drama. Shanker (Sornalingam), an aeronautical engineer, a close ally of Pirabakaran burst in one day into the building armed with a sub-machine gun and began peppering the walls with gunfire. The inmates, including a woman typist fled in all directions, and Shanker got away, having bundled a leading henchman of Uma Maheswaran as captive. The incident naturally made big news in Madras. Hours later, he phoned me and asked me (in Tamil): How was the job? I reserved my comment. Shanker, who always went around with a cloth shoulder bag was a regular visitor at my Besant Nagar office during the early months of 1984. Once, he produced a sophisticated looking hand grenade and asked me to guess the country of its origin. What did I know of hand grenades, except seeing such objects in films? He said with a grin that it was a sample of what they were producing in Tamil Nadu itself! Since then, nothing used to surprise me. He stopped coming, when he found that various intelligence people began nosing around our office. I met Shanker again in Jaffna on August 1, 1987, on my 24-hour visit there, three days after the Rajiv Gandhi- Jayawardene Agreement. Of that later. He was to meet his tragic end several years later, on September 26, 2001, when a claymore explosive device went off while he was driving on the Oddusuddan road in the Mullaitivu district. It was an area under LTTE control, and the belief was that it was the work of a deep penetration unit of the Sri Lankan army with the possible help of some Tamil militant mercenary. Since the death of Kittu, in terms of a human asset, his was the biggest loss to the LTTE.

One of the characteristics of most Sinhalese politicians is their sense of inadequacy in coping with crisis situations. The 1958 riots against Tamils showed that despite his pompous oratorical skill, Bandaranaike's forte was not crisis management. Jayawardene was faring no better in the post-1983 situation. Even before the disgraceful events of July 1983, as early as June 4, Government sources had begun to talk of war. The Colombo newspaper The

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*Sun*, of that date quoted a Defence Ministry spokesman as saying that what the army faced in Jaffna was a "war situation", and that the forces there had to be given the "freedom of the battlefield". That "freedom" was given by the tiring President by the beginning of 1984. Indisciplined soldiers ran amok, killing civilians on sight, sometimes any moving object in bad light such as goats and cows, but the "war" was nowhere getting won. In March, dozens of civilians were killed in the market town of Chunnakam.

Meanwhile in India, LTTE leader Pirabakaran who has been alleged by his detractors as being elusive and secretive was to give the first of many interviews. Indian journalist Anita Pratap who was the first to fly into Colombo in the wake of the 1983 pogrom was also the first to be granted an interview by the LTTE leader. His views given in measured tones should have come as a revelation to his critics that it was not merely military prowess that distinguished him from his fellow men, but that even at the age of 30, he had a mature grasp of history and a keen awareness of the world situation. Under the headline – ***"If Jayewardene was a true Buddhist, I would not be carrying a gun"***, *SUNDAY* magazine of Calcutta said in its issue of 11- 17 March, 1984

> V.Pirabhakaran (30) is the Chairman, Central Committee and military commander of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an underground organisation founded in 1972 and outlawed by the Sri Lankan government in 1978. As the most wanted man in Sri Lanka today, Pirabhakaran carries a reward of over one million Sri Lankan rupees on his head. He is gentle and kind, but as one who heads the most powerful liberation movement in Sri Lanka, he is ruthless and determined in his mission to free the Tamils of his country from the oppression of the Sinhalese.

Some quotes from his interview:-

"The shocking events of the 1958 racial riots had a profound

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impact on me when I was a schoolboy. I heard of horrifying incidents of how our people had been mercilessly and brutally put to death by Sinhala racists. A great passion overwhelmed me to redeem my people from this racist system. I strongly felt that armed struggle was the only way to confront a system which employs armed might against unarmed, innocent people."

"I named the movement "Liberation tigers" since the Tiger emblem had deep roots in the political history of the Tamils , symbolising Tamil patriotic resurgence. The tiger symbol also depicts the mode of our guerrilla warfare"

"As soon as the Tiger movement was formed, I went underground and lost contact with my family.....I have not seen my family members for the last 11 years. I do not think they regard me as an ordinary person leading an ordinary life. They are reconciled to my existence as a guerrilla fighter"

"Nature is my friend, life my philosopher and history is my guide" (in answer to Anita's question – "Who is your friend, philosopher and guide?")

"An Irish leader once remarked that when the British indict a person as a "terrorist", it implied that he was a true Irish patriot. Similarly , when the Sri Lankan government refers to me as the most wanted man, it means that I am a true Tamil patriot. Hence, I feel proud to be indicted as a wanted man"

"I have never felt lonely at any point of time. Loneliness is only a problem with those who are buried in their own individual egos. A true revolutionary transcends individuality and develops a collective, social consciousness. I live and struggle for a common collective cause"

*"Induction of US arms is not only a threat to the Tamil*

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*freedom movement, but also to India's national security. America's objective, as you will be certainly aware, is not simply confined to helping the Sri Lankan army to crush the Tamil liberation struggle. Their ultimate aim is to secure a naval base at Trincomalee. Such a happening will convert the Indian ocean into a war zone, and will increase the tension prevalent in the region."*

*"There cannot be a blueprint or a time limit for a freedom struggle. Everything depends on the situation: in our homeland and happenings on the international scene"*

In the midst of the orgy of violence in Sri Lanka, on August 2, the scene shifted dramatically to Madras when two unclaimed suitcases at the airport blew up, killing 32 airport workers. The explosives were meant to go off on an Air Lanka plane in flight or after its arrival in Colombo, but blew up prematurely. Two days later, on August 4, government forces went on a rampage at Valvettiturai, the hometown of LTTE leader Pirabakaran. The *Financial Times* (London) of 21 August 1984 quoted Secretary of the Citizens' Committee, K.C.Adiapatham, as saying: "A total of 130 houses, 90 shops, four cars and six fishing boats were destroyed. In addition, the navy confiscated 29 boats." 500 young men were tricked into giving themselves up for a routine identity check, but were rounded up into several buses and taken to army camps in the south. **"Jaffna is a city of fear",** reported David Graves in the *Daily Telegraph,* London (July 2, 1984).

The President meanwhile was getting more desperate. During May-June he visited no less than four world capitals. On May 19, he was winging his way to Beijing, on June 16 he was in Washington, five days later in London and a few days later in New Delhi. Russel Warren Howe reporting for the *Washington Post*, said:

"President Junius Jayawardene of Sri Lanka, now on a two-day official visit here, is expected to plead with the United

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States to intervene in his country if India uses force to protect Sri Lanka's Tamil (Indian) minority from growing ethnic violence. Although the US ambassador in Sri Lanka, former Republican Gov. John Reed of Maine has told Mr.Jayawardene that there is no prospect of America sending in the Marines to help the Sri Lankan government, the 78-year old president seems convinced that he can change Washington's mind, Western diplomats in Colombo are reporting. .....Although US-Sri Lanka relations are relatively warm, Western diplomats here are more and more concerned about the often eccentric behaviour of the aging South Asian leader, who has proclaimed his country to be the fulcrum of a campaign to save the world through Buddhism....."

In London, the *Sunday Times (24 July 1984)* published a despatch from Mary Anne Weaver in Colombo, which said:

"Sri Lanka's President J.R.Jayawardene flies to London this week to seek Mrs.Thatcher's support for his war against the " Tamil Tigers".... The president has already made an agreement with the Israeli intelligence organisation, Mossad, and has hired a group of mercenaries, veterans of the SAS to set up an intelligence organisation and a paramilitary force to combat the guerrilla threat. The Britons arrived in Sri Lanka from the Sultanate of Oman, to begin a year's training programme.... Before Sri Lanka made its decision to hire mercenaries, it asked Britain and the United States to set up an anti-terrorist assistance programme to be run by the CIA and M15. President Jayawardene has conceded that because of pressure from large Tamil lobbies, London and Washington had turned down the request.....The Mossad's help has proved " invaluable", according to a Sri Lankan security source. Physical conditions in the Jaffna peninsula are identical to those in the Gaza strip. Some of Jayawardene's advisers are worried about the consequences.

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> One Western intelligence official said: What happens when an SAS-directed hit team goes against the Tigers in Madras? It is just this kind of foolhardy behaviour that could lead to an Indian invasion...."

What happened in Delhi? *The Times,* London, (July 3), in a report from its correspondent said:

> Two days of rather prickly talks between President Jayawardene and Mrs.Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister ended yesterday with the President marking off the proposals he is making on the future devolution of power within Sri Lanka as none of her business. In the formal statement he made at the end of the talks, he said: "*I reiterated to the Prime Minister my view that the political resolution of this matter is an internal matter of Sri Lanka, to be settled between the various Sri Lankan parties concerned*". He added "*and she entirely agreed*". Although Mr.Jayawardene told reporters that he would be happy to use the good offices of anybody towards solving what he said was "not the Tamil problem" – "***but the Tamil disaster***" he was adamant that the Indian view would not influence him.
>
> In the event that Mrs.Gandhi smiled as Mr.Jayawardene's back was turned, certainly no one saw it, and no one reported it. The President might not have been as full of beans on his homeward journey as when he set forth on his Washington-London-Delhi foray, but his sense of bravado did at no time leave him. Back home, he ordered another offensive against the Tamils. *TIME* magazine said in its issue of 27 August (by Spencer Davidson. Reported by K.K.Sharma in Colombo).
>
> For two weeks, the violence had spread through Sri Lanka's northern province, a bloody tit for tat of ambush and attack pitting government forces against insurgents fighting for

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independence for the country's predominantly Hindu Tamil minority. Roads lay deserted, banks and offices were shuttered and shops opened for only a few hours each day. By the time a measure of calm had been restored last week, at least 150 people had lost their lives, including 25 government troops – the worst bloodletting in Sri Lanka since July 1983. Said a Western diplomat in Colombo: This is the first sustained and significant challenge to the government's authority in a year……"

**The month of October brought the shattering news of Mrs.Gandhi's assassination. She was shot by one of her own bodyguards, as an act of revenge against her ordering troops into the Sikh Golden Temple at Amritsar. Her son Rajiv Gandhi, sworn in as Prime Minister, dissolved parliament and sought a mandate at elections to be held in end-December. Jaffna, in an act of spontaneous grief over Mrs.Gandhi's death observed three days of mourning from November 1. Schools, offices and shops were closed, while Sinhalese soldiers taunted the people by singing "baila" songs and shouting "Where is your amma now?".**

President Jayewardene meanwhile, might not have made any policy breakthroughs in Beijing, Washington or London, but he was certainly getting arms. Minister of State Anandatissa de Alwis told newspaper editors in Colombo on December 7 that part of the foreign military equipment had already arrived. The government had ordered a significant military build-up, he said. *Jane's Defence Weekly* reported that Sri Lanka will get five more Chinese naval craft by the end of the year. The deal was concluded during Jayewardene's Chinese visit. The Sri Lankan Navy was already known to have five Chinese "Shanghai-II" class fast attack craft , besides two large patrol boats capable of offshore operations and 22 coastal patrol craft. On December 23, two days before Christmas, the government announced that armed forces will now use rockets, bombs and small-calibre artillery against "Tamil separatist guerrillas". On December 31, the Colombo Sinhala newspaper, the *Divaina*, quoting a government spokesman said five friendly

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countries, both western and Socialist, had offered military aid to Sri Lanka, the aid to include fighter planes and ships.

It was obvious during the last month in 1984 that the Government was getting confident that with this massive military assistance, it could go in for a military solution. A war psyche was being built in order to prepare the Sinhalese people to accept more sacrifices. They were being told through the columns of the racist State-controlled media that an invasion of Sri Lanka was being organised from India. As the year ended, the newly appointed tub-thumping Minister for National Security, Lalith Athulathmudali was quoted as saying that for every man that the Tamil militants trained in any part of the world, "we will train a hundred persons".

The month of December 1984 was to prove decisive in many other ways. The Colombo All-Party Conference was reconvened for December 14, and the TULF delegation had arrived three days ahead. But it appeared doomed even at that point of time. US special envoy General Walters had just concluded two days of "intensive talks" on a possible military solution with the President and Lalith Athulathmudali (Dec.10, 11). On the 10th itself the Government-owned *Daily News* reported that Gen.Walters was expected to discuss "***a shopping list of military supplies necessary to meet the terrorist threat***". The paper also said there was a strong possibility of ***"Britain providing helicopters and patrol boats to overcome the terrorist menace".***

The Round Table Conference met as scheduled on the 14th and President Jayewardene went through the motions. He proposed the amendment of the constitution for the setting up of Provincial Councils and a "second chamber" for resolving the "ethnic problem". The Buddhist clergy boycotted the talks, and on the following day when Mr.Amirthalingam was talking of "studying the President's proposals in depth", the Buddhist clergy warned the President not to try to rush the proposals until "terrorism was completely eliminated". On December 21, the All Party Conference ended abruptly. Delegates, including the TULF leaders, who had gone ready to discuss

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the proposals were told, if not in so many words, that there was nothing to discuss. On December 22, it was announced that the President's proposals had been rejected by all Sinhalese parties, including an influential section of the President's own party. On December 24, the President sacked his racist Minister of Industries Cyril Mathew. It was like bolting the stable door after the horse had fled.

Meanwhile, at Besant Nagar in Madras, on December 23, there was a shocking incident. A pre-dawn bomb blast went off at the beach house where Anton Balasingham and Adele lived. It was a bomb with a timer device that shook the house and shattered the doors and windows, but Balasingham and Adele fortunately escaped. There was no doubt that it was an assassination attempt, and suspicion fell on a former retired Sri Lankan Tamil police inspector of Indian origin who had ingratiated himself with various militant groups in Madras.

By year-end, the mass psychosis had reached fever pitch. The Colombo newspaper *The Island* in its Sunday issue of December 30 ran a lead news item under the headline – LANKA PONDERS STEPS IF EELAMISTS DECLARE UDI. The report said,

> The Sri Lanka Government is considering counter measures in the event of Eelamist groups making a Unilateral Declaration of Independence. Sources said that information had been received of such attempts being made by expatriate Tamil groups abroad....According to intelligence sources the Eelamist strategy is to proclaim a new state called Eelam on January 14, Thai Pongal Day....Sources also said that the assistance of the Pakistan Embassy had been sought in this respect. The Embassy was asked by the Foreign Ministry what action was taken by the Pakistan government when Bangladesh was declared an independent sovereign state in the aftermath of the war....

Came Thai Pongal Day, January 14, 1985 and there were no signs of any

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UDI. It was either that some panic merchants or arms dealers had sold Sri Lanka that story, or that the Government itself had spread the hysteria in order to gain international sympathy. But as it happened during Jayewardene's 11-year rule, with every passing year getting more dreadful than the previous one, 1985 proved no different.

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# Chapter 20

## 1985: Rajiv Gandhi, Indian embroilment and failure at Thimpu.

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# 1985: Rajiv Gandhi, Indian embroilment and failure at Thimpu.

The year 1985 saw a changed political scenario in Delhi. New players had come into the centre court of power. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, a former airline pilot with no grounding in politics, and clearly out of depth in the nitty-gritty of international relations was heavily dependent on a few advisers. This was in contrast to his mother, the late Indira Gandhi who had a mind of her own. As long as she lived, India's policy towards the Sri Lankan question ran a steady course. By restricting India's role to one of providing "good offices" (while keeping other options open), she tried to bring the two parties to the dispute to the negotiating table, but always at a safe distance – in Colombo. This did not suit President Jayewardene, because the entire thrust of Sri Lankan policy was to make it appear to the world that the problem somehow was not entirely Sri Lankan, and that India herself was part of the problem!

Both Jayewardene and his hawkish Minister of National Security Lalith Athulathmudali were to find in Rajiv Gandhi, a much easier person to deal with. There was this incident on 9 February, 1985, when a Zaire-owned DC aircraft ran out of fuel and made a distress landing at Trivandrum airport in Kerala. Indian news agency UNI reported (quoting unnamed official sources) that authorities at Trivandrum initially agreed to refuel the aircraft, but later detained it after finding that it was loaded with arms and ammunition bound for Sri Lanka's armed forces. Trivandrum officials referred the matter to Delhi. Within 24 hours it was refuelled and cleared. Lalith Athulathmudali who had come for talks at Delhi told *Reuters* that the speedy dispatch of the

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plane was a hopeful sign of better relations between the two countries. "I hope and trust this is an example of how relations are going to be managed", he said. What hurt sentiments in Tamil Nadu was the way Rajiv Gandhi brushed aside DMK Rajya Sabha member V.Gopalaswamy's objection to the plane being given clearance, with the sarcastic remark that there was nothing to indicate, as Mr.Gopalaswamy alleged, that the arms were meant "to kill Tamils".

A further example of how "relations were going to be managed" came on 3 March, when the Sri Lankan government made it known that Mrs.Gandhi's emissary and veteran negotiator G.Parthasarathy's "good offices" role was no longer acceptable, the implication being that he was a Tamil. India obliged by sending instead Foreign Secretary Romesh Bhandari to Colombo on 24 March. Four days later, the Colombo newspaper, *The Island*, known for its anti-Indian views, commented:-

> Prominent Government personalities expressed satisfaction on India's changed attitude towards the Sri Lankan problem, following talks between Indian Foreign Secretary Romesh Bhandari and Sri Lankan leaders.....informed sources said they felt there had been a positive change of attitude on the part of India with Mr.Bhandari as negotiator under the new Indian Premier Rajiv Gandhi as compared with Mr.Gopalaswami Parthasarathy as the Indian government envoy under Mrs.Indira Gandhi.....

Janardan Thakur writing in the *Times of India* on 26 March, said:

> ***So charmed was President Jayewardene with India's new "plenipotentiary" that he presented a dazzling necklace to Mrs.Bhandari....The old policies on Sri Lanka lay in shambles; totally discredited, and with them the former man for Sri Lanka, G.Parthasarathy. It was forgotten that Mrs. Gandhi must have had some very good reason for the line she had followed.....".***

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The new over-zealous Boy Scout diplomacy that followed her death was going to bring new pressures not only to the Tamil liberation struggle, but also to India herself. The Sri Lankan problem was soon airlifted from Colombo to New Delhi via Madras and Bangalore and ferried onwards to a third country – India's protectorate Bhutan and its capital Thimpu. From what was India's "good offices" role, it assumed the proportions of a mediatory role; finally ending up in the clumsy and hurried deportation orders on three Tamil activists - Nadesan Satyendra, a prominent participant at the very Thimpu talks that India had staged; S.A.Balasingham, LTTE spokesman who did not go to Thimpu and whose group was averse to the whole exercise; and S.C.. Chandrahasan, who was given a "raw" deal, despite his close interaction with India's own intelligence service.

The months from January up to the Thimpu talks saw heightened tensions in Sri Lanka. While the government was equipping itself with military hardware in preparation for a military showdown, it was at the same time meeting with several reverses on the military front. The West, which was wary of obliging President Jayewardene with arms aid while Mrs.Gandhi's initiative in promoting a political settlement lasted, had now begun to relax their stand. According to reports in *Jane's Weekly* and the Government-owned Colombo Press, the following items were billed for purchase during January to May - Two twin-engined double aluminium hull "Dubar" coastal patrol craft equipped to carry missiles (from Israel); nine British-built" Cougar" naval boats; two British-built 46-seater Avros to transport troops; more patrol boats and T-56 assault rifles from China; and AK-47 and M-16 rifles from Pakistan.

But the more notable happenings during this period were the stepped-up Tamil militancy. In January, militants blew up a Colombo-bound train carrying army personnel near Murikandy. Twenty two soldiers were killed and 25 others seriously wounded. In February, they blasted the approach road to Gurunagar army camp in Jaffna, making movements of armed forces difficult. Subsequently, the camp itself was abandoned. In March, the

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Kilinochchi police station came under attack. More daring was the attack on the Madawachchiya police station in the Sinhalese-dominated Anuradhapura district. In April, the four active militant groups, LTTE, EROS, TELO and EPRLF decided to function as a united front under the term "Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF). The Jaffna police station was stormed..... With the Tamil militancy thus getting bolder, the Sri Lankan armed forces responded by going on a rampage in the north in an orgy of civilian killings. In one incident about 50 Tamils were forcibly locked up inside the Valvettiturai community centre building and blasted alive with bombs. The Tamil Tigers countered this by shooting their way into the Buddhist town of Anuradhapura in an attack that sent shock waves in government circles. A dispatch from Dalton De Silva to the *Saudi Gazette* of 18 May said,

> Disguised as soldiers, about 25 guerrillas drove through the sacred Buddhist city in a hijacked bus in broad daylight on Tuesday spraying bullets at random. By the time they melted into the jungles of a wild life park 50 km. away, at least 145 people were dead. And three days later, not a single assailant has been caught despite a combined manhunt launched by the army, navy and air force. The attack was the first major thrust into a majority Sinhalese area by guerrillas....If the terrorists can attack Anuradhapura with impunity, there's nothing to prevent them from hitting Colombo, one resident in the capital said.

The spiral of tit-for-tat violence continued. On the following day in Jaffna, enraged Sinhalese naval personnel boarded a civilian boat named Kumudhini off the islet of Nedunthivu, and axed and clubbed to death 48 men, women and children in a gruesome massacre.

The Anuradhapura attack was not only an act of terrorism, it was also an assault on the Sinhala psyche. Interestingly, the anger of the Sinhalese man on the street turned not on the Tamil Tigers, but on their own government! The first indication that Sri Lanka was seeking India's help in arriving at a

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political understanding with the Tamil militants came within two days of the Anuradhapura incident. Mr.Jayewardene's foreign policy adviser, the ex-Press baron Esmond Wickremasinghe was rushed to Delhi on 16 May. On the 28th, Romesh Bhandari flew to Colombo, and on June 1 Mr.Jayewardene himself arrived in Delhi. On June 2, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the visiting President were reported to have had a 50-minute discussion without aides. Later, as a gesture of South Asian solidarity, the two leaders flew together to tour the cyclone-ravaged areas in Bangladesh and to share their grief with President Ershard and his people. They had reportedly continued their talks on Sri Lanka on the flight to and from Dhaka. Michael Hamlyn reporting from Delhi for *The Times*, London, said that Mr.Jayewardene was "smiling broadly as he flew back home after two days of talks". Although both sides were silent on the content of the talks, it became known that the intention was to arrive at a cease-fire between the government and the militants. The task of persuading (or pressuring) the militants to accept the cease-fire was understood as the responsibility of the Indian government with the help of the Indian intelligence outfits.

On June18, it was announced that the five militant groups had yielded to Indian pressure for an immediate cease-fire, or as Minister Althulathmudali termed it, "cessation of hostile activity". The Liberation Tigers had apparently held out against it until the last moment before bowing to Indian pressure. The terms of the cease-fire envisaged a four-phase plan. Phase I was to start on 18 June and continue for three weeks, Phase II to continue for another three weeks, Phase III to consist of two weeks in which police stations which were closed down were to reopen and the law and order functions to be carried out by the police. In addition an amnesty was to be declared and those in custody against whom charges are not filed were to be released. It was only during Phase IV that secret talks on substantive issues for reaching a political settlement were to take place between the emissaries of the government and the representatives of the Tamil political leadership and the Tamil militant groups.

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The terms of the cease-fire also stated: "The venue of these talks could be a third country acceptable to both sides. Every effort should be made to maintain the secrecy of these talks". But as it happened, nothing seemed to work out in the way the whole process was envisaged. Although the "secret talks" were to begin only in Phase IV, the talks commenced at Thimpu, the Bhutan capital on the 8th July during Phase I itself – at the instance of the Government of India. If the intention was to arrive at some quick fix solution, it was obviously a case of poor judgement.

The Thimpu talks lasted two rounds. The first round of talks began on 8 July and ended on the 13th. The second phase was from 12 to 17 August. Leading the Sri Lankan delegation was a man who was not even part of the Colombo government. He was Hector W.Jayewardene, a legal-constitutional expert, a Queen's Counsel, perhaps more importantly, the President's own brother. The very choice of a person without any political weight or share in the governance of the country gave a clue to the president's intention. At no time during his 12-year rule did he lose faith in a military solution to settle the ethnic problem. His only interest was to buy time, first through the long drawn-out All Parties Conference which came to a pitiful end in December, and now through the Thimpu charade.

Although the six Tamil groups at the conference table – the TULF, the LTTE, EROS, TELO, EPRLF and PLOTE had jointly given their endorsement to what came to be known as the four Thimpu principles, there were varying attitudes among them towards the entire exercise. LTTE leader Pirabakaran had refused to go to the Bhutanese capital, and even the two LTTE delegates who went there, according to an Indian journalist, were "frog-marched" by the Indian intelligence men! The joint statement made by the Tamil delegation on the concluding day of Phase I of the talks read as follows:

> It is our considered view that any meaningful solution to the Tamil national question must be based on the following four cardinal principles:

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**1. Recognition of the Tamils of Sri Lanka as a distinct nationality;**

**2. Recognition of an identified Tamil homeland and the guarantee of its territorial integrity;**

**3. Based on the above, recognition of the inalienable right of self-determination of the Tamil nation;**

**4. Recognition of the right to full citizenship and fundamental democratic rights of all Tamils, who look upon the island as their country".**

The statement further said:

> Different countries have fashioned different systems of government to ensure these principles. We have demanded and struggled for an independent Tamil state as the answer to this problem arising out of the denial of these basic rights of our people. The proposals put forward by the Sri Lankan delegation as their solution to this problem are totally unacceptable. Therefore we have rejected them as stated by us in our statement on the 12th of July 1985. However, in view of our earnest desire for peace, we are prepared to give consideration to any set of proposals, in keeping with the above-mentioned principles that the Sri Lankan government may place before us.

With India fearing that the talks between the two delegations were getting nowhere, Romesh Bhandari flew to Thimpu and spent two days in informal meetings with both delegations. It was then agreed that they would meet again on 12 August at Thimpu. The second phase of the talks saw the Tamil delegation bringing in a well-known lawyer, Nadesan Satyendra as the virtual spokesman for the ENLF. Meanwhile, tension was back in the air in Sri Lanka. All those involved were aware that time was running out, as the cease-fire that had brought relative peace and calm was to end in mid-September. Tamil

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opinion in Jaffna which was already opposed to Tamil militant participation at the talks was suspicious that Jayewardene was using the 3-month cessation of hostilities to reinforce the armed forces. It was public knowledge that the government was in the process of forming a 10,000 strong auxiliary force to fight along with the regular army.

When the second round of talks began on 12 August, the President's brother Hector Jayewardene was back as the leader of the Sri Lankan delegation. In response to an Indian suggestion that the delegation should include politicians rather than legal experts, President Jayewardene countered saying that he had made his brother an ambassador and plenipotentiary with full powers to make decisions. The sessions began on an uncompromising note with Hector Jayewardene rejecting outright the four cardinal principles enunciated by the Tamil delegation. The talks dragged on till the 17th, sometimes on an acrimonious note to which acrimony Indian Foreign Secretary Bhandari himself contributed a share.

Sadanand Menon, writing in the Sunday Observer, Bombay, of September 8, commented:

> A notable feature of the Eelam muddle of the past few weeks which has pushed any conceivable solution to the Tamil nationality question troubling Sri Lanka to a distant horizon, has been the bull-in-the-China-shop diplomacy of India. And the bull is none other than foreign secretary Romesh Bhandari - so say Tamil groups who were at Thimpu II..... Romesh Bhandari, fresh from a road accident, was rushed to Thimpu, plastered nose and all, and he launched a tirade against the Tamil delegation – a speech liberally laced with epithets like "bloody" and "what the hell". Though smarting under this patronizing "scolding", the youngsters in the Tamil delegation took it all silently, but at one point, the "new face" in the team representing TELO, 53-year old N.Satyendra, whom Bhandari had not met before

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> and who was an unknown factor even within the ENLF circles abandoned his restraint and told Bhandari – "Stop this stupid talk. We are not here to learn lessons from you". He insisted that Bhandari apologise and withdraw words like "bloody" used in reference to the Tamil groups. Satyendra said: "Mr.Bhandari should realize that at Thimpu we are not just anybody but the representatives of a nation and a people and expect to be treated at least with minimum protocol and courtesy. This is no way to proceed with a negotiation". This in turn prompted Bhandari to walk off in a huff exclaiming, "Maybe you want to teach me lessons now".

Ultimately, the Tamil delegation to a man walked out of the talks on the 17th August. Prior to walking out, they made the following statement :

> As we have talked here in Thimpu, the genocidal intent of the Sri Lankan state has manifested itself in the continued killings of Tamils in their homelands.In the most recent incidents which have occurred during the past few days more than two hundred innocent Tamil civilians including young children, innocent of any crime other than that of being Tamils, have been killed by the Sri Lankan armed forces running amok in Vavuniya and elsewhere. It is farcical to continue peace talks at Thimpu when there is no peace and no security for the Tamil people in their homelands…our participation at these talks has now been rendered impossible by the conduct of the Sri Lankan State which has acted in violation of the cease-fire agreements which constituted the fundamental basis for the Thimpu talks.

There were several reasons why the Thimpu talks had to collapse. The ground situation back at home did not favour any non-emotional dialogue. Both parties stuck to certain rigid positions with a yawning gap in between. President Jayewardene had no intention to resolve the dispute across the

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table, nor was the LTTE which had no stomach for theoretical exercises and legalistic nuances. They had also read the past history of negotiations with Sinhalese governments correctly. Even the other militant organizations, once they had achieved their right to parley with the government on equal terms, had no further intention to be coerced by Indian intelligence men into compromising positions. It may also be said that the very absence at Thimpu of LTTE leader Pirabakaran made the entire process unpromising.

Looking back, there were some positive features that came out of Thimpu. It was the first occasion when Tamil militant groups sat together with the Tamil political leadership to face the representatives of the government. It was the first time anyway, when despite their mutual differences they managed to speak with one voice. More importantly, those four cardinal principles have become part of the political vocabulary of our times; and what would seem the bottom line demands on the Tamil question.

The ground situation was however getting worse and worse. The north and east became regular killing fields. That did not deter President Jayewardene from his habitual haranguing. A sense of frustration and senility was evident when in end-December, he gave an interview to India Today. (December 15, 1985) The interview was spread over three hours in two separate sessions. Some selected questions and answers,

**Q**. But how have they (Tamil militants) been able to maintain their movement for so long? And what is the kind of help they get?

**A**. Help is coming from India. Their weapons are coming from India. We have found their weapons with Indian markings.

**Q**. Why can't you go to the north and talk to the people direct if you say the Tamil people don't want Eelam and thereby isolate the terrorists?

**A.** How do I go there? None of our ministers or members

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of Parliament can go there. I can only go in a bullet-proof glass box.

**Q.** But why the massive arms build up?

**A.** . We are doing all these because we are facing threats from outside and within our country. We fear that somebody might invade us, so we must have an arms build-up. We are preparing against any invasion.

**Q.** What exactly is this invasion fear about?

**A.** I don't mean the Government of India. I am sure Rajiv will not do it. If the Government of India wants to invade us, which I am convinced they will not, they can take over Sri Lanka in less than 24 hours and arrest me. But if that happens then all the Tamils living among the Sinhalese will be finished.

**Q.** Are you preparing yourself for the worst?

**A.** I am not fully prepared to tackle Jaffna. I want to finish first with the other provinces. It is not difficult to handle Jaffna. We can cut off food and supplies to the peninsula and flush out the terrorists in a month's time. But will India support our action?

As far as the Tamils were concerned, what distressed them was not the threats from Jayewardene but what they perceived as insensitivity on the part of the Rajiv Gandhi government towards the problems of the Tamils. Pirabakaran who resented the deportation order on Balasingham went underground for a while, but subsequently expressed a desire to meet the Indian Prime Minister in person. Speaking to Anita Pratap, he said: "So far we have had contacts with the Indian Prime Minister only through third parties. We want to meet him directly so that we can clear a lot of misunderstandings and suspicions" (SUNDAY magazine 29 September-5 October, 1985).

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In the light of subsequent events, this interview, (the second given to Anita Pratap), revealed a lot about Pirabakaran's thinking, as well as offering insights into his own persona. Some extracts:-

**Q**. Do you think the peace talk is Jayewardene's ploy to buy time while he strengthens his military?

**A. Of course it is. But then time benefits us too.**

**Q.** You have become something of a folk hero in the Tamil areas. What do you think are the reasons for your becoming a legend in your own life- time?

**A.** That is for the people to say. Basically, I hate such sentiments because they pander to one's ego. A liberation fighter has to transcend the confines of his ego and his self to immerse himself wholeheartedly in the struggle. We are only symbols of the aspirations of the Tamil people.

Q. Suppose, due to circumstances, the relations between the Indian government and Tamil militants are strained to such an extent that India withdraws support to you, will you be in a position to continue your liberation struggle alone?

**A. Do we have any other alternative? Fight we must, till our goal is achieved. India's sympathy is a morale-booster, but should India withdraw support it would not mean the end of our liberation struggle. After all we did not start our liberation movement with India's support or with the help of some other external forces. We will fight till we die. When I die someone else will take over. As Subhas Chandra Bose said, "No liberation fighter can delude himself that he alone can deliver freedom". If my generation dies without attaining freedom the next generation will carry on the struggle".**

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# Chapter 21

## 1986: Sri Lanka sinks deeper into the mire of war

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# 1986: Sri Lanka sinks deeper into the mire of war

The year opened with a boastful President himself "firing" the opening salvos of war. In an interview with Indian journalist Kuldip Nayar (*The Times*, London, January 27, 1986), Mr.Jayewardene declared:-

> I shall have a military solution to what I believe is a military problem.....I am winning this war. I have come to realize that only success matters. I do not care what New Delhi, London or any other country says. How quickly and effectively I can exterminate the militants is the crux of the problem and I am on the point of achieving this.....My army is better equipped and better trained. Now I have more weapons. Countries like Pakistan are training my men. In 1985 Pakistan trained 60 officers and 1500 Junior Commissioned officers. My air force is also being trained by people from abroad....

There was good reason for the President's buoyancy, because even while he was talking to Kuldip Nayar, the government had been unleashing terror on an unprecedented scale both in the north and the east. On the 19th January there was the first of many massacres at Iruthayapuram in the Batticaloa district. Three Church workers, including the catechist, were pulled out of the church by Special Task Force (STF) commandos, sprayed with bullets, and in the course of a violent 2-hour spree, 21 other Tamils were left dead.

On the 25th January, eleven helpless plantation Tamil refugees waiting for a train at Kilinochchi railway station, men, women and children, were

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mowed down in a matter of minutes, after a party of 50 soldiers surrounded the railway station.

On 10th February, black-uniformed commandos in Vavuniya waylaid a Tamil businessman in a Peugeot car, robbed him of Rs.75 thousand cash and jewellery, locked him and his two companions in the car and set fire to both vehicle and occupants.

On the 19th February, nearly 100 farmers, farm labourers and some gypsies working in paddy farms in an isolated hamlet called Udumbankulam in the Amparai district were surrounded by members of the armed forces. They were then hacked with their own reaping knives, kicked with boots, tied up in twos, and shot down finally and made into a vast human heap. Stacks of paddy, straw and timber and cadjan pulled out from a nearby hut were used to make a mass cremation. Three women chased away earlier hid themselves behind a headland and watched the gruesome scene in terrified fear. Documented eye witness accounts of all these brutalities were available, and were published by the Tamil Information Centre, with the names of practically all victims. Why were the Sinhalese people not told about these, some might ask*? **Strangely enough, they were told. But what were they told? It makes fascinating fiction!***

A daily newspaper called the *SUN,* (later extinct) with its Sinhala-language sister paper called *Davasa* published by M.D.Gunasena's became the main offenders. The Iruthayapuram frenzy of January 19th got transformed in the columns of the *SUN* into a heroic battle!. FIERCE BATTLE – MANY CASUALTIES, said the *SUN* headline of the 20th. Its readers were told,

> Two policemen and nearly 50 terrorists lay dead in the wake of a 10-hour face-to-face confrontation between the security forces and Tamil separatists near Batticaloa town yesterday.... The security forces then called in reinforcements and Air Force helicopters joined the battle. Amidst the raging battle there were conflicting accounts of the number of terrorists dead....

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> Batticaloa police confirmed the deaths of 30 terrorists, but the Defence Ministry in Colombo could only confirm the death of 21 terrorists...the Defence Ministry added that of the 21 terrorists who had died, 14 died of gunfire and seven committed suicide by taking cyanide capsules!

It showed the level of sophistication that the Colombo government had achieved in myth-making! A government press communiqué explained the Kilinochchi incident thus,

> "A demented soldier went beserk and fired his personal weapon in a frenzy at the railway station killing ten persons including some women and children. The other soldiers immediately overpowered the demented soldier and took his weapon away."

Eyewitness reports however said that there was more than one soldier involved in the massacre. That was the government's way of exonerating the soldier from punishment on supposed grounds of "temporary insanity"

The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) reporting the Vavuniya car incident said that *in a clash between two terrorist groups three terrorists were shot dead and burnt inside the car!* Not a bad try in fiction writing, but not quite measuring up to *SUN* standards! The Udumbankulam massacre turned out to be another gun battle between the heroic forces of Sri Lanka and the dirty terrorists, except the locale was changed from Udumbankulam in Amparai to Lahugala. *"40 terrorists killed in hour-long battle in the Lahugala jungle*", said the Colombo report.

In Jaffna, my successor at the *Saturday Review*, Gamini Navaratne, carried on valiantly, rebutting the false propaganda of the Colombo Press. But, except in the case of a few intellectuals in the south, the voice of the *Saturday Review* could hardly prevail over the hysterical din caused by sections of the Colombo racist Press. In a letter addressed to *Saturday Review* and published

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by the paper on 15th February, Dr.Ediriweera Saratchandra, the well-known don and playwright wrote:-

> Reading your journal, the arrival of which I look forward to eagerly, has made me a sadder but a wiser man. **It is the misfortune of the human being that, although Truth is an ultimate Good, knowledge of the truth does not always bring him happiness. Ignorance is, often, bliss. I wonder how many people in the South realize the extent of the sufferings that our brethren, the Tamil people of this country, have been undergoing for so long, and are undergoing at the present moment. People to whom I have spoken do not believe what I say. Or they do not want to. ....**They will not realise anything until they are themselves touched by this Evil that is stalking the country.....The security forces have lost their balance of mind. Fear of unknown death traps like landmines and their own impotence before the unseen enemy have driven them to this state..... I am raising my feeble voice among thousands of others to say that the Sinhalese do not want this war. We want to live in peace and amity with the Tamils.....

Apart from killings elsewhere in the north-east, Jaffna was being subjected to aerial attacks both by helicopter gunships and fighter bombers. While dozens of civilians were getting killed every week, a sense of recklessness seemed to grip the government. Even places of worship were not spared. On 21 April, a bomber plane dropped 14 bombs on the Selvasannithy Temple complex, near the Thondamanar army camp. The 40-foot temple chariot was burnt to ashes and the temple bell weighing more than two and a half tons was shattered into smithereens. The government itself was sustaining heavy losses in the process. A newly acquired Avro turbo prop 40-seater aircraft and a Bell 212 helicopter were both damaged by militant fire in late January. At Kuchchaveli, north of Trincomalee Tamil militant fire caused forced landing of a helicopter. On March 25, a Siai Marchetti plane of the Air Force crashed

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into the sea off Beruwela in the south and the pilot and an officer cadet were both killed.

By the beginning of 1986, there was a marked change in the Rajiv Gandhi government's attitude towards the happenings in Sri Lanka. India's External Affairs Minister B.R.Bhagat delivered the strongest statement ever by an Indian spokesman when he accused the Sri Lankan government of genocide and asked Sri Lanka to work out a time frame within which it will have to settle the ethnic problem. This was of course followed by the beating of war drums against India in parliament and in the Press in Colombo. *The Island,* in its issue of March 1, castigated Bhagat and said in its editorial: " ... *The Indian Minister's remarks are ill-informed and unwarranted and smack odiously of an arrogant Big Brother mentality...To say that there is genocide in Sri Lanka is either the act of a fool or a knave....*" On 29 April, an Indian delegation led by P.Chidambaram flew to Colombo in an effort to help towards a political settlement , but nothing was to come out of it.

Even as the Chidambaram mission reached Colombo, Jaffna was to witness a regrettable massacre, not one involving the government, but an ugly fratricidal one. In four days of a search and kill operation nearly 150 TELO cadres were put to death by the LTTE. Among the dead was the TELO leader Sri Sabaratnam himself, who was hunted down and killed while he was hiding in Kondavil. The LTTE which was always suspicious of Indian motives, looked upon TELO as an armed creation of Indian intelligence that was acting on Indian orders, and one that was being built up as a counterweight against them. The LTTE crackdown came at a time when TELO had seriously weakened itself through internal factionalism. By late 1985, while Sri Sabaratnam was in India, news had come from Jaffna that an internal crisis was brewing between two factions within the group, one led by Dhas, the Vadamarachchi leader and a reputed marksman, and another led by "Bobby" who hailed from Kalviankadu in the Jaffna town area. The group was also earning a bad reputation in the peninsula for indiscipline and arrogant behaviour. Sri Sabaratnam left for Jaffna in January 1986 with the

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ostensible purpose of making peace between the two factions, but it was becoming evident that his real intention was to promote Bobby, his favourite, as the overall northern commander.

An ugly incident that happened on March 11, was to mark the beginning of the end of TELO as a credible force. On the pretext of discussing their differences and also looking up some wounded comrades Dhas was invited to come to the Jaffna hospital. When he arrived at one of the wards along with four of his men, (leaving behind their arms in their van in the hospital compound outside) Bobby' group surprised them by opening fire at close range and killing all five of them, and in the process killing a hospital patient as well. TELO's Vadamarachchy supporters were aghast at what they thought was an act of treachery and turned away from the group thereafter. The group was guilty of another heinous act when they killed two TULF M.P.s, V.Dharmalingam and M.Alalasundaram, for no other reason than that the accusing finger would be pointed at the LTTE!

(*Much later, while discussing the TELO's 1986 massacre with a LTTE high-up I ventured my opinion that instead of killing the TELO boys, who after all, were fighting for the same objective, Kittu and his men could have taken them prisoners. He did not dispute that, but offered his own explanation of what happened. He said that in many cases where the LTTE entered TELO camps with guns blazing, they had expected stiff resistance, but to their surprise, they found the TELO boys were unarmed going down tamely. The reason for that, he said, was arms were deliberately withheld by the TELO leadership from camps occupied by Dhas's men, for fear of any backlash once Dhas was killed.)*

The month of May was packed with events both in Sri Lanka and in India. On 3 May, an Air Lanka Tristar plane was ripped apart by a bomb at the Colombo airport. At least twenty people were reported killed and more than forty injured. The Lockheed Tristar had left Gatwick airport in London on the night of May 2 stopping on its way at Zurich and Dubai before landing in

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Colombo. It was scheduled to fly on to Male, carrying mainly French, British and Japanese tourists. The bomb, reportedly concealed in raw meat which was regularly airlifted from Colombo to hotels in the Maldives, exploded as the ground crew were closing the aircraft's hold after loading the cargo. No one claimed responsibility for the bomb, but the Government accused the LTTE of planting it. The LTTE promptly disclaimed responsibility and denounced it as "an act of pure terrorism aimed to kill innocent civilians which deserved outright condemnation".

Four days later, on the morning of 7 May, another bomb exploded in the Central Telegraphic Office (CTO) in Colombo which left at least eleven people dead and over a hundred injured. The bomb explosion ripped through the bottom two floors of the building and left the ground floor a heap of rubble.

While Colombo was reeling under these bombs and Jaffna was shocked by TELO's decimation, **a political drama was being staged in Madurai in Tamil Nadu, to which this writer was a ringside witness.** The Tamil Eelam Supporters' Organisation (TESO) of which DMK president Karunanidhi was chairman was holding its "*Save Ceylon Tamils*" conference on May 4. The closed-door meeting held at Hotel Pandyan was attended by an influential phalanx of Indian Opposition politicians. They included BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee, N.T.Rama Rao, the leader of Telugu Desam,( the main Opposition party in the Lok Sabha,) Lok Dal leader H.N.Bahuguna, Punjab Akali Dal's General Secretary Balwant Singh Ramoowalia, Dr.Farook Abdulla's National Conference of Kashmir representative Abdul Rasheed Kabuli. Among southern leaders were P.Nedumaran of the Kamaraj Congress, V.Gopalaswamy, DK leader K.Veeramani, K.Unni Krishnan, P.Upendra and Dr.Subramaniam Swamy (!) – a distinguished galaxy of leaders hardly ever seen together on any occasion.

One of the objectives of TESO being the forging of unity among all Eelam political groups, the invitees included the TULF, the LTTE, TELO, EROS,

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EPRLF and PLOT. The TULF trinity, Amirthalingam, Sivasithamparam and Sambandan, were there, and so were the representatives of the militant groups, Lawrence Thilagar of the LTTE, Ratnasabapathy of EROS, Varadaraja Perumal of EPRLF and "Mathi" of TELO, standing in for Sri Sabaratnam who was in Jaffna, and was to be killed two days later. The PLOT was shut out, having arrived too late. Present at the closed-door conference on Karunanidhi's invitation as "observers" were – the *Tamil Eelam Liberation Front* (TELF) represented by Kovai Mahesan and M.K.Eelaventhan, *Organisation for Protection of Tamils of Eelam from Genocide (ProTEG)* represented by S.C.Chandrahasan and A.Thangathurai, the *Tamil Information and Research Unit (TIRU),* represented by this writer, and the *Tamil Information Centre*, Madurai, represented by Ms.Maheswary Velautham. While the Indian leaders sat at the long head table, we of the Eelam Tamil component took our marked seats on the three sides of the head table. Once the photo sessions were completed, the doors were closed to the Press.

Although outside the conference hall, the city of Madurai was seen in an emotional mood, with giant cut-outs of Karunanidhi and Rama Rao and painted scenes of atrocities against Tamils in Sri Lanka, and anti-Sri Lankan slogans on walls, the mood inside the conference hall that day was restrained. The LTTE- TELO clash in Jaffna was already casting a shadow over the proceedings. There was a concerted appeal from the Indian leaders appealing for unity among the Eelam groups, and one by one every one pledged to work together, amusingly Thilagar inclusive, while back home the LTTE was on the war path against TELO!

(*As an observer only, I had no voice in the proceedings, but an unexpected thing happened. Varadaraja Perumal, the spokesman for the EPRLF said his piece in Tamil, which naturally was not understood by the North Indian leaders. Karunanidhi at the centre of the head table made a request (which I didn't hear) that someone should translate what Perumal said into English. The request was made to no one in particular, and for a moment, no one*

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*responded. Suddenly, Ratnasabapathy rushed up to my seat and whispered : "Siva, can you give a gist in English of what Perumal said?". Totally unprepared, I managed nevertheless to convey what I thought was an important statement made by Perumal. He had stressed that what the EPRLF was asking for was NOT any military intervention on the part of India but only moral support for the Eelam Tamil cause. Ironically, the same Perumal was later to become the pet poodle of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) when it intervened militarily to take on the Tigers the following year!)*

On May 17, the government began a 3-day, 3-pronged offensive to regain military control of Jaffna, involving an estimated 3,000 troops, helicopter gunships and bomber planes. Stiff resistance by the LTTE prevented government forces from making any headway. Every time government forces tried to break out of their camps, they were repulsed, and the attempt to overrun Jaffna was shelved. But such was the indiscriminate aerial bombing that even the Jaffna hospital was not spared. With the Indian government condemning this, there began a war of words between Colombo and Delhi; which of course did nothing to change the ground situation in the northeast. Jayawardene was obviously losing his nerve. Incensed by the Tristar and CTO bombings, he took the unusual step of sending on compulsory leave all Tamil employees working in government departments and State corporations, on the plea that they were a "security risk". Piqued by reports in the *Guardian*, London and the BBC, he ordered the expulsion of British correspondent Humphrey Hawksley. Failing to make progress in Jaffna, his forces escalated military operations in the East. Mass arrests in Trincomalee and aerial bombardments in Batticaloa followed.

Jaffna was meanwhile coming increasingly under LTTE control. Sathasivam Krishnakumar (Kittu), LTTE's battle-hardened Jaffna commander held supreme authority. Short in stature, bespectacled, and with receding hair, his looks belied the fierce reputation he enjoyed. TELO which was in a sorry state, losing its leadership for the second time, Kuttimani, and Thangathurai first, and now Sri Sabaratnam, was abandoned to its fate by its own patrons

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in RAW, who in a cynical move, began to build up EPRLF instead, a ploy that infuriated the LTTE, and eventually made the EPRLF meet the same fate as TELO. The PLOT meanwhile, plagued by internal contradictions (it had already killed its own theoretician Santhathiar), and fearful of LTTE designs had begun to withdraw from the peninsula. With the EROS tacitly prepared to go along with the LTTE, the field was left clear for the LTTE to assume the *primus inter pares* position among the Tamil militant groups. In fact, in the eyes of both Indian and Sri Lankan governments, it was clear by now that only one man mattered if there has to be any kind of solution, and that was Pirabakaran.

The problem was India-aided efforts to find a political settlement were not meeting with any success. There was an unbridgeable gap between the positions adopted by the Colombo government and the Tamil militants. LTTE leader Pirabakaran sent Chief Minister M.G.R. a detailed critique why the Sri Lankan proposals fell far too short in meeting Tamil aspirations. Instead of exerting pressure on Jayewardene to yield more on the question of devolution and the North-East linkage as insisted by all Tamil militant groups, the Delhi government opted for the easier course – that of using strong- arm tactics on the militant leaders living in India. In the early hours of 9 November, the Tamil Nadu police launched what was known as "Operation Disarm". They raided the various rebel camps in the state, rounded up the leaders, seized a large cache of arms including rocket launchers, communication equipment and surface-to-air missiles. That was the first time that Colombo came to know that Tamil militants possessed those missiles. The militant leaders, including Pirabakaran, Balasingham, Balakumar and Selvam (TELO) were further humiliated by being taken to police stations, interrogated and reportedly finger-printed like common criminals, and thereafter kept under house arrest. Padmanabha and Uma Maheswaran who were away in Delhi escaped the humiliation. In Colombo, the news was received with widespread satisfaction.

It was made out that the immediate provocation for the crack-down was

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a shooting incident on 1 November at Choolaimedu, a suburb of Madras, involving EPRLF militants and local people. A local was killed and others injured when Douglas Devananda, then the military leader of the EPRLF opened fire at an angry crowd that was trying to storm the group's office following an earlier dispute.( Devananda was subsequently expelled by the EPRLF). The same night, some PLOTE cadres were involved in unruly behaviour in a village at Thanjavur and the police was called in. These were apparently not isolated incidents where firearms were used against locals. Similar incidents were reported at Vedaranyam in the southern coast. Ill-disciplined cadres of PLOTE and TELO were the main miscreants, but in the eyes of the public they could not discriminate one group from another. There was justifiable popular outrage over use of firearms in a civil society that had known nothing more lethal than bicycle chains! But in blowing up into a high-profile political drama what should have been treated as law and order incidents, the Delhi government had obviously other reasons. It was, - so Delhi believed, - a "softening-up" process that would break the will of the LTTE and compel them to accept a political settlement. But alas, it did not work that way.

The deliberate act of humiliation at the hands of the Tamil Nadu police on 8 November, was not something that Pirabakaran was to forget easily. Apart from the clumsiness with which "Operation Disarm" was done, there was an element of sadism and sheer spite in the way that Tamil Nadu police chief Mohan Das and his men treated Pirabakaran and other leaders. Rajiv Gandhi tried to arrange through MGR a meeting between Pirabakaran and Jayewardene during the SAARC summit at Bangalore, but the LTTE leader who was airlifted to Bangalore snubbed Delhi by refusing to meet Jayewardene. MGR himself was apparently taken aback. It resulted in another fiasco when MGR ordered the LTTE's high-frequency communication system to be seized. Pirabakaran went on a fast-unto-death demanding the return of the equipment. Within twenty four hours the communication system was returned along with the arms seized earlier. It was Pirabakaran's first non-violent triumph! This writer was witness to the jubilation at the Indira Nagar

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office of the LTTE when Pirabakaran broke his fast by accepting a glass of orange juice from DK leader Veeramani. (*Those were the days before the Dravida flag bearer Veeramani fell under the spell of Chief Minister Jayalalitha!).*

An attempt by Rajiv Gandhi to make the two parties accept what was known as the "December 19 proposals" by which the Sinhala-majority Amparai electoral district was excised from the Eastern province, also ended in failure, when Jayewardene refused to go along with it. Meanwhile, Pirabakaran, refusing to bow to Indian strong arm tactics decided to sever his residence link with Tamil Nadu which had been his base for the past several years. His declaration that the LTTE would henceforth take over the civil administration in Jaffna was to make hackles rise both in Colombo and Delhi.

(Unconnected with these political developments was the visit to Jaffna by the only Sinhalese leader who had the potential to rise above petty politics and racist prejudice, and become a bridge-builder between the Sinhalese and Tamil peoples. He was the popular cinema star turned politician Vijaya Kumaratunga. A devout Christian, he had married Chandrika Bandaranaike, who under his influence broke away from the SLFP founded by her father and later led by her mother. They formed the breakaway party called Sri Lanka Mahajana Party (SLMP) that withered away after he was assassinated by the Sinhala racist JVP on 15 February 1988. His widow Chandrika also reverted back to the Bandaranaike policies after her husband's assassination. What was worse, as President of the country in later years, she began to consort with the very party that murdered her husband in an effort to discredit the UNP.)

Vijaya Kumaratunga gave a special interview on his visit to Jaffna to the *Christian Worker,* Colombo, which was published in its issue of 3rd Quarter, 1986 under the title – **What I saw in Jaffna.** Since it was a forgotten part of history, almost the entirety of the interview is given here:

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"On October 20th afternoon I left for Jaffna to help secure the release of two army men who were taken prisoner by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the course of fighting in Mannar the previous week. I had earlier received a telephone call from "Rahim" (his real name I learnt later was Kanagaratnam) promising to release the two soldiers to me in Jaffna. He wanted me to come with members of the families of the two captured servicemen and media personnel from the newspapers, radio and T.V. so that the soldiers could be handed over to me in their presence.

I had naturally to get Government permission for such an arrangement and the Government at first agreed only to my making the trip alone It was with some difficulty that I was able to even obtain permission for Ossie Abeygunasekera and Felix Perera of my party to accompany me on this mission. For security reasons I was asked to fly to Jaffna by a Sri Lankan Air Force (SLAF) aircraft.

On our arrival at Palaly airport, we were taken to the Palaly Army camp where we lodged for the night. At the camp I learnt that there was in fact to be an exchange of prisoners: two of the LTTE captured by the Army were to be released in exchange for the two captured servicemen in LTTE custody. Colonel Wimalaratna described this as a "historic occasion". The mass media had reported earlier that the two soldiers were to be handed over to the Jaffna G.A. Mr.Panchalingam, but this was apparently not acceptable to the militants.

At the Palaly camp early that evening I was present when there was a telephone conversation between "Rahim" and Captain Kotalawala about the intended exchange of prisoners and, Colonel Wimalaratna gave eleven names to Captain

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Kotalawala to be read out over the phone to 'Rahim'. It was agreed that 'Rahim' should, on the next morning, inform Captain Kotalawala of the two prisoners who were to be released out of the list of eleven names. A German TV team who had been in Jaffna a few days earlier with Government permission also recorded an interview with Colonel Wimalaratna in my presence at the Camp. In this interview the Colonel confirmed that this was the first time that prisoners were to be exchanged and said this was a good turn of events. He was appreciative too of the earlier gesture of the militants in handing over coffins containing the bodies of nine soldiers killed in action in Mannar to the Jaffna Fort Camp. All this is recorded on video and cannot therefore be controverted.

On the 21st morning Colonel Wimalaratna came to my bedroom with a telex message he had received from the Joint Operations Command (JOC) with instructions that no prisoners should be released. I too saw this message. Despite the countermanding of the arranged transfer of prisoners, I said that I had to meet the militants and we were therefore flown to the Jaffna Fort Camp from Palaly.

We stood at the barrier near the entrance to the camp with an Army raincoat held over our heads since it was raining somewhat. On seeing the militants approach us at a distance, I advanced with my companions to meet them some distance away from the barrier where we had been standing. These were tense moments for us as soldiers and militants, fully armed, stood facing each other on opposite sides. A false move by someone on either side could well have meant the end of us.

'Rahim' a smart young man of 20 years rushed forward and shook hands with me and I introduced him to my companions.

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He asked where Captain Kotalawala was and called out to him to come out and meet him. The tension was broken when 'Rahim' and I walked back to the barrier where we were joined by Colonel Weerasekera who was in charge of the Jaffna Fort Camp, Colonel Wimalaratna and Captain Kotalawala. It was the first meeting between Colonel Wimalaratna and 'Rahim' along with the militants. Captain Kotalawala was already known since it was he who had received the bodies of the dead soldiers from the militants earlier. After introductions were made, we left the camp with the militants, accompanied by the German TV team. The Army received permission to send another cameraman to accompany us (whom the militants discovered before long to be a Sub-Inspector of the National Intelligence Bureau!). The militants even invited the Colonel and the Captain to join us but this offer they politely declined.

We walked on into the town where we met "Kittu", the northern leader of the LTTE, a stout bespectacled militant about 28 years old who was obviously held in high esteem. Kittu spoke in Tamil and was translated into English by 'Rahim' who was fluent in Sinhala too, having been educated at Trinity College, Kandy. Kittu and 'Rahim' appeared to be very popular figures wherever we went. Accompanied by Kittu and 'Rahim' we went first to see the two captured soldiers at a nursing home. Both of them were being treated for their injuries and looked relaxed and comfortable. They said they were being treated well. 'Rahim' and Kittu explained to the soldiers that the government had violated its undertaking to release two prisoners in Army custody in exchange for them and that it was not possible therefore for them to be released to me as arranged.

We had a long discussion on this matter. I tried my best to secure the release of the two soldiers notwithstanding the

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Government's refusal to exchange prisoners. But the militants were reluctant to do this as they felt they had been cheated. They explained that they wanted to show the world that they had no desire to fight against the Sinhalese or against the ordinary soldiers who were merely fighting for their pay. That was why they had wanted the parents of the captured soldiers, journalists and photographers to be present at their release. Kittu said they had earlier released two policemen unconditionally, also two run-away soldiers who had surrendered to them. They had also sent the bodies of nine soldiers killed in Mannar to the Jaffna Fort camp, as a gesture, since they too had suffered casualties, and they knew that parents would always want to have the last rites done for their children killed in action. It was a human feeling. But now in the present case, it was different, since these were prisoners of war taken in battle and an undertaking was violated and they had to show their disapproval……..

We then proceeded to the LTTE party office, where a Press conference was held. From here we visited the famous Nallur temple where a pooja was held for peace and communal harmony in the country. Kittu and 'Rahim' who normally do not go to the Temple also removed their shirts and joined us at the pooja. After this I was able to address the people who had gathered outside the Temple and I did so from the top of a LTTE armoured car…….

**We next visited the General Hospital and went round the wards seeing also the parts damaged by the shells and bombs of the Security Forces. The hospital was well equipped and had 137 doctors. Kittu did not go inside the hospital with us since it was outside normal visiting hours: he did not wish to break rules even though he was the undisputed LTTE leader in the North!** On coming outside after our hospital visit, we

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had lunch and were then greeted outside by a massive crowd which cheered and mobbed me. I had even to sign autograph albums!.....We then left for the LTTE training camp situated at what was once the Residency and its gardens (originally British Governors' and later Government Agents' residence – S.S.) – some 37 acres of sprawling land in the very heart of the Jaffna town.....I saw young boys going through their training and also examined arms and equipment. The grenades were marked "Made in Pakistan" "Army supplies" I was told. Most of the weapons were from the USA and marked "Property of the US Army".....The militants now have anti-aircraft missiles and they produce their own mortars.

I went round Jaffna town and the environs and there are many things I could say. I shall however restrict myself here to making a few general observations. Firstly, the impression I had was of a people now well accustomed to the sound of shells and explosions and who were going about their normal business notwithstanding these. Even the children now play "Army and Tigers" instead of "Cops and Robbers". Bus transport is normal and so is also activity in schools and hospitals. Even the State offices function and civil administration goes on as usual, the only difference being that while the government pays the employees, real control of the administration is in the hands of the militants. There are now no normal courts of law in the official sense except "Eelam Courts". In place of the normal State police there are "Eelam" policemen.

Backing for the militants is evident in Jaffna for they have emerged, as a result of the Government's own mishandling of the situation, as protectors of the people and of their self-respect as a community. The Army is for the most part confined to their camps and tolerated by the militants. It is also a fact that

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even firewood and water have been supplied to the Army camp in Jaffna Fort free of charge by the militants themselves!

When we returned to the Army Camp in the company of the militants we were met at the entrance by Captain Kotalawala. 'Rahim' introduced some of the militants to the Captain and jokingly asked him to take good care of the NIB-Sub Inspector and sent out with us as a cameraman. "He didn't say he was an inspector, but we found that out", said Rahim. "The Sri Lanka Government surely deserves a better intelligence service!" he remarked. Everyone, including the inspector laughed good-naturedly. We shook hands and said goodbye....

There was an interesting development on our return for we found out from the pictures we had brought back that one of the two captured servicemen reported to have been Private Kithsiri Fernando was in fact Second Lieutenant Ajit Chandrasiri of the Gajaba Regiment believed to have been killed in the Mannar fighting and supposedly buried at Moratuwa in a sealed coffin!"

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# Chapter 22

## 1987: Indian Army walks into Northeast Sri Lanka: Near-fatal attack on Rajiv Gandhi



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# 1987: Indian Army walks into Northeast Sri Lanka: Near-fatal attack on Rajiv Gandhi

Sri Lanka's main guerrilla organization, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, announced yesterday that it plans to take over the administration of the Tamil-dominated northern Jaffna peninsula, which it has largely controlled for three years. It plans to levy taxes, issue postage stamps and open three television stations, among other measures" reported ***The Guardian***, London, in its issue of January 2, 1987.

On January 5, ***The Daily Telegraph***, London, said:

> The Sri Lanka government has cut off petrol and diesel supplies to the one million Tamils in Jaffna. This follows a decision by the Tamils' separatist leaders to issue licences to vehicles in the area and deny the government the money.

Sri Lankan journalist Iqbal Athas in the course of a long dispatch to the ***Sunday Times,*** London, of 4 January, said:

> As I arrive by helicopter (in Jaffna) the war between the government forces and the Tamil guerrillas is taking a new and ominous turn.....A few hundred yards past the high-walled Nallur Kandasamy Temple, one of the most venerated places of Hindu worship in the area, we find in a narrow lane a spacious two-storey house. It is the Jaffna headquarters of the Tamil Tigers. There is symbolism everywhere. A large table inside is covered with a cloth resembling tiger skins. On satin-covered wooden stands, a small part of the Tiger armoury is laid out :

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> rocket-propelled grenades mounted on launchers, M16 rifles, Kalashnikovs and sniper rifles fitted with telescopic sights. On top of a filing cabinet lies a machine gun, its ammunition belt winding down into the drawers. Glass cabinets are stacked, incongruously, with Jane's defence manuals....

John Rettie in Colombo, reporting for ***The Guardian***, London, of 8 January, said:

> ....The Indian High Commissioner , Mr.J.N.Dixit, earlier this week warned President Jayewardene that India would view with concern any military action against the peninsula. He also expressed his country's anxiety about the ban on fuel supplies. The warning brought a sharp retort in Parliament when the Minister of National Security, Mr.Lalith Athulathmudali , said that suspending fuel supplies was the least that a government could do when its authority was usurped....

*These reports set the tone for the dramatic developments that were to follow during the entire year. A brief picture of events from January to August of the year could be gleaned from my own diary jottings.*

*January – August 1987. My Diary Entries (* ***Madras****)*

*January 5:* Indian T.V. and Radio announce that India has cautioned Sri Lanka against a military solution, and also expressed deep concern over economic blockade of Jaffna. Conveyed by High Commissioner Dixit in Colombo to Jayewardene this morning.

*January 8*: Battles rage in Pt.Pedro and Jaffna.

*January 20*: Rajiv Gandhi Press Conference. Foreign Secretary A.P.Venkateswaran humiliated by Rajiv Gandhi in public, resigns.

*February 9*: Jaffna- Colombo links cut off ? Prelude to a major massacre?

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*March 7*: Aerial bombing of Jaffna.

*March 15*: Madras-Tiruchi Rockfort Express blasted by bomb device. 25 dead, many more injured. Suspicion falls in Eelam Tamil militants.

*March 17:* It seems reasonably certain that "supplies" have been given to four Tamil militant groups, except the PLOTE.

*March 23*: Tigers overrun army mini-camp between Dutch Fort and Mandaitivu, kill several soldiers, capture eight of them with arms.

*March 30:* Kittu attacked in Jaffna with hand grenade? Lost a leg? EPRLF suspected.

*April 21*: Big bomb blast in Colombo. 5 p.m. Peak hour crowd at Central bus stand in Pettah. Over 200 killed and about 300-400 injured. Blast heard for 3 kms. around.

*April 22:* Aerial bombing of Jaffna in reprisal. About 200 killed? Tamil prisoners in Welikade jail attacked by fellow Sinhalese prisoners.

*April 27:* Tamil Nadu Food Minister Panrutti Ramachandran announces Rs.4 crores worth food, medicine and provisions for besieged Tamils in Jaffna.

*May 26:* Sri Lankan government launches "Operation Liberation One" on Jaffna. Joint offensive by Army, Navy and Air Force.

*May 28:* Sri Lanka government claims capture of Valvettiturai. M.G.R. flies to Delhi and has one-hour meeting with Rajiv Gandhi, in the company of Panrutti Ramachandran.

*June 1:* India announce urgent relief supplies to Jaffna.

*June 2:* Sri Lankan cabinet meets in emergency session. Also

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Parliament. Special trains carrying rice, flour, sugar etc. arrive at Rameshwaram. Indian Red Cross team to ferry the supplies in a flotilla.

*June 3:* Indian flotilla turned back by Sri Lankan Navy, as was expected.

*June 4:* Indian food air drop in Jaffna by five AN-32 transport planes which take off from Bangalore. It is of course a brazen violation of Sri Lankan air space, and Colombo is livid with rage. Sri Lankan Cabinet meets in emergency session and calls it a "naked violation of our integrity and sovereignty". Protest sent to United Nations. Michael Hamlyn, reporting to the *TIMES*, London quotes exasperated remark of a Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry official: "*There was not much we could do about it. We were hoping the sacks of salt would fall on the terrorists. Maybe next time they will be kind enough to drop coconuts!*"

*JUNE:* Throughout the month, Sri Lankan army and air force continue to pound Jaffna. Guerrilla resistance by LTTE. While the war continues, Indian ships bring relief supplies intermittently.

*July 5:* Army camp at Nelliady Maha Vidyalayam attacked by "Black Tiger" suicide squad led by "Capt.Miller". Army buildings razed to the ground, three armoured vehicles smashed. 18 soldiers killed and arms and ammunition captured by LTTE.

***July 24*: Startling development. Pirabakaran airlifted from Suthumalai Amman temple premises in Jaffna to Trichy in India, and onward to Madras where he meets M.G.R. Flown to Delhi to meet Rajiv Gandhi, possibly tomorrow. All done with the permission of the Sri Lankan government, says Delhi. What a ridiculous situation really, come to think of it. A wanted man, the most wanted man in the country, dead or alive, is quietly picked up**

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**by a neighbouring government and taken away. Is India already controlling Jaffna? Pirabakaran's picture on Tamil TV, 8.40 news. First time it happened.**

*July 25: Hindu* and *Express* coverage on Pirabakaran's arrival in Delhi food for comparative study. PTI Sudhahar and P.K.Bala call again to get my assessment about likely developments in next two or three days. I tell them P. is not likely to sign on the dotted line (as Puri had told them) unless there are some secret guarantees. I was proved right.

*July 26:* If militants do not fall in line they will be arrested. Version told to me by an Indian intelligence chap. All is silent on the Delhi front. Ram of the *Hindu* has a lot of things to say today, which points to a major trap. The trap is coming along with a big peace build-up in Colombo. There is going to be a lot of arm-twisting of P. TULF and other groups also invited. Amir, according to a friend who saw him last night sounds a sullen, frustrated man.

*July 28*: Riots in Colombo. Rioting begins in Pettah. Tamil shops burned, although it is an anti-government riot, specifically anti-Jayawardene. Two Buddhist priests killed in police fire.

*July 29*: **Rajiv Gandhi in Colombo. Rioting continues for second day. Finance Minister Ronnie de Mel receives Rajiv at airport. From airport, helicopter ride to heavily guarded army grounds at Galle Face and from there to Janadhipathi Mawatha. Premadasa, Gamini Jayasuriya, Lalith, Wimala Kannangara gang up against proposed accord. Ronnie, Gamini Dissanayake and Hameed solidly with President. Big boost on Indian TV. Accord signed. Near-fatal attack on Rajiv by naval sentry in guard of honour. Both SL and Indian TV show the incident. Jayawardene says sentry suffered from sun stroke! But later apologises.**

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*July 31*: Commander R. of Navy, Major W. and Major R.K. all of Indian military intelligence call on me. We discuss the Accord. They stress how important it is that the accord be given a chance and express worry and concern about LTTE attitude. I tell them no point in keeping P. incommunicado. That will only anger our people. You picked him up not from Indian soil, but from Jaffna and keep him like a prisoner. He will never allow himself to be bullied. Suddenly the question is asked: Would I like to go to Jaffna and help in the peace process? I fob them off and give them names of some prominent citizens in Jaffna who might be able to perform that function and that I was out of touch with Jaffna since 1983.

At 11.30 p.m. the doorbell rings. Who could it be? Watchman closes the outside gate at 11 p.m. Wife and children nervous. It was Majors W and R.K. Would I like to fly to Jaffna tomorrow morning? It was a chance not to be missed. On the other hand LTTE is likely to misconstrue my mission. I weigh the pros and cons within minutes and say Yes. Wife and children excited and nervous but I reassure them. The newspaperman in me tells me "Go".

*August 1*: Saturday. What a weekend! Two days and a night in Jaffna. Major R.K. arrives in jeep at 7 a.m. To Tambaram military airfield. Some delay in getting clearance for me. Every 5 or 10 minutes a plane is either landing or taking off! What hectic activity! We board the plane at 8 a.m. A12 transport plane loaded with cabbage and carrot in sacks and assorted food items. Four or five army officers, my two intelligence friends and myself. No safety belt, only side seats. Take-off at 8.15 a.m. Low flying. Could see Tamil Nadu from the air. We land at Palaly 9.15 a.m. The first sight was of SL military post. Next was of similar small transport plane that had ploughed through the tarmac and looked abandoned. **So I had landed on Sri Lankan soil! For the second time in four years I had travelled from one country to another without passport, without immigration or customs**

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**check! First illegally by boat to India, this time by courtesy Indian military transport!! Is that a record?**

Jeep ride to KKS with Indian flag. On the way a local squatting at deserted bus halt suddenly gets up, tucks his verti and gives the jeep a salute! He thinks mother India has come to save them. Palaly Training College being wired for electricity. **Large monster of an Indian tank trying hard to manoeuvre in a narrow Palaly lane. Why was it there? What was it doing on the third day of a peace agreement? Hardly indicative of a Peace-Keeping Force?** We arrive at an upstair house at KKS – once the home of a Tamil shipping agent, now the IPKF Hqrs. Refreshments served. A long wait before going into Jaffna. I tell my Indian duo I need no clearance to go to my own country, but they have to get Tiger clearance. All that's arranged, they say. An Indian army officer says we have to wait for Kumar. Who is Kumar? Maybe another Indian army officer?

I see a stocky figure in the distance, slightly taller than Pirabakaran, armed only with a walkie-talkie slung over his shoulder, and two unarmed escorts, bodyguards I think, walking behind him. "Ah, there comes Kumar", says an Indian army officer. Then I realise; it was Kumarappa. I had known practically most of the LTTE top rungers both on the political and military side, but not Kumarappa. He had been in charge of Batticaloa, but Pirabakaran had got him down to co-ordinate with the IPKF because of his fluency in the English language. I introduce myself. What surprised me was the chumminess that had developed between him and the Indian army officers within three days!. Col. Brar of the Maharashtra Regiment was Kumarappa's counterpart on the Indian side. He touches the walkie-talkie that Kumarappa was carrying and asks, "What is the range of this?" Kumarappa replies in friendly banter, "You think we are going to tell you all that". Col. Brar mumbles: "You fellows have better gadgets than the Indian army"

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We start off. Kumarappa and the two boys in the front car, I am in a jeep along with the two Indian majors, and Col. Brar, with his escorts bringing up the rear in another jeep. Passing Palaly, we pass through a no man's land. Vacant houses, no signs of human presence. We stop at a three-way junction at Tellippalai. What a sight! A barrier, Tiger flags, a large crowd. We had entered Tiger territory. From then on, Kumarappa in the front car, Tiger flag, AK-47, we three in another car. Col. Brar and his escorts get back with the jeeps, while we proceed towards Chunnakam. Cheering for Kumarappa all the way. At Chunnakam market, there is a barrier manned by Tiger girls. A large crowd fills the market space. Slogans demanding "Send our leader back".

At Tinnevely, opposite the University is the LTTE Hqrs. The first to greet me was "Mahattaya" Mahendrarajah. I introduce the two majors. We are fed with large-sized "vadais" and equally large mutton rolls. "You must be missing your Bristol cigarettes", says Mahattaya and sends a boy for a double packet! Courtesies apart, he takes me to a corner and chides me in hush-hush tones – "Why did you come with these fellows?" I explain, and he is satisfied. Thereafter he goes to meet the two Indians, with Shanker whom I met next, acting as the interpreter.

The arrangement was for me to get back to Madras the following morning in the company of the two majors. I tell Shanker of my need for transport to see my sister in Kokuvil and sister-in-law in Nallur. A van with a Tiger flag and a boy with an AK-47 in the front seat is placed at my disposal. I go to Nallur. Nervousness at seeing the Tiger flag and excitement at seeing me. Uncle Shadah from Navaly arrives in car. He was the one who saw me off at the coast four years earlier. Around 9.30, I was about to sit for dinner, the same van with Tiger flag and boy with AK-47 arrives. Shankar calls me outside and asks in confidence for help in a certain matter. Would I be able to speak to the two Indian majors and arrange for two or three badly injured cadres to

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be flown to Madras for treatment there? Sure, I said, I could get back to Tinnevely office on my own after dinner in Shadah Uncle's car. Communication mix-up. No signs of Shankar and the Indians at office. Kumarappa had meanwhile volunteered to speak to the two majors himself, (which I didn't know at that time,) because he had already had a rapport with Col.Brar and others at KKS. Since clearance had to be obtained from Madras it was decided to leave for KKS earlier than scheduled the following morning. No time to collect my bag at Nallur, but Shankar assures it would be collected and sent to my Madras flat (It duly arrived on the 2nd, but not before causing worry and tension at Nallur when the boys went to collect the bag and not seeing me).

*August 2:* I come to know later that our hurried departure had also something to do with the arrival at KKS of the Indian army's head of the Southern Command, Lt.Gen.Depinder Singh. Passing Tellippalai barrier, we stop at a house with large front garden. **I did not know I was to be an eye and ear witness to a drama that had historic importance written all over. There was Col.Brar, there was the IPKF commander, Maj.Gen. Harkirat Singh, other Indian officers, and there was that tall, bearded Gen.Depinder Singh. Erect of bearing, with a swagger stick, he was a complete contrast to Harkirat Singh. Col.Brar made the introductions, chairs were arranged, Kumarappa seated between Depinder Singh and Harkirat Singh, along with other Indian officers. Since I had no status at the gathering I was given a chair a little apart from the main "actors", but still within seeing and hearing distance. There were a few courtesies exchanged between Kumarappa and the Indians, when suddenly I found Kumarappa raising his voice and addressing Gen.Depinder Singh with a finger pointed at him – "General", he was saying, "unless our leader tells us to hand over weapons, we shall not do it. Send our leader back. If you force us, we'll fight you General. We may die, but it does not matter, we'll fight you!" There was an audible gasp by someone. What**

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**was a minute earlier a pleasant relaxed scene had suddenly taken on heightened tension. While others heard him in silence, Col. Brar hurriedly pulled his chair closer to Kumarappa and began a soothing damage-control act. "Come on Kumar, who wants to fight you, we are here on a peace-keeping mission, ……". The sternness in Kumarappa's face had not left him however. "What is the guarantee you won't use force against us?", he thundered. "You are here to disarm us". I thought of the Tamil saying which runs something like this – "Even when you do "Ariya Koothu"(an alien dance) keep your eye fixed on your real objective". The soft-spoken "Kumar" knew his courtesies, but courtesies was one thing and Tiger single-mindedness was another. Feelings were soothed anyway and Kumarappa shook hands with Depinder, Harkirat and others and left along with his two bodyguards.**

**Depinder Singh turned to his own officers and said: " He is right. Say, I am in charge here. If someone asks you to hand over your weapons will you do it? You won't, without my saying so. That is army discipline". That was a clear indication to me of the healthy respect that Indian army generals as well as Army intelligence had towards the Tigers, sorely lacking among Rajiv Gandhi's advisers in the power centres in Delhi.**

After a hearty English breakfast at the IPKF army officers' canteen at KKS, the flight back to Tambaram in Madras. Home, to the great relief of my wife and two daughters

Depinder Singh who later authored a book titled IPKF IN SRI LANKA (Trishul Publications, Delhi) wrote of his meeting with Pirabakaran in Madras. This is what he said:-

Back in Madras information was received that Prabhakaran

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was transmitting through on his way to Jaffna from Delhi where he had been having discussions that preceded and followed the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. On my expressing a desire to meet him, it was arranged to bring him to the Area Headquarters Officers' Mess Suite where I was staying. He was accompanied by Yogaratnam Yogi who did the interpreting and two other LTTE cadres. Before entering my room he removed his chappals outside in the verandah. He was dressed in a bush shirt and trouser and turned out to be a short, well-built and handsome man, edging slightly on obesity with a strong face, stubborn chin and a diffident but pleasant presence. Prabhakaran had, by this time, become a messiah to the LTTE and stories about his exploits, a few true, the majority exaggerations, were legion. Over a cup of tea he mentioned that the LTTE had agreed to the ceasefire only because India insisted and nodded his head when I explained that this insistence was a consequence of the misery and pain inflicted upon the Tamils both because of the fighting and the economic blockade. Neither of us thought it necessary to confirm or deny reports making the rounds that Prabhakaran had been virtually under house arrest in Delhi. What he did say was that he would never again trust the External Affairs Ministry (of India) and the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW- the Indian equivalent of the US Central Intelligence Agency). Considering the time and place, I did not ask him to elaborate. The LTTE opposition to the Accord was later to be further confirmed when it came to light that Prabhakaran, in one of his telephone calls from Delhi in the days preceding the signing of the Accord, reportedly remarked that he was waiting to get out from Delhi and would then teach Rajiv (Gandhi) a lesson. .....

The Rajiv Gandhi – Jayewardene "Peace" Agreement, officially termed *"India-Sri Lanka Agreement to Establish Peace and Normalcy in Sri Lanka"* had left us with no option but to close down the Tamil Information Centres

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in Madras and Madurai. Clause 3 (1) of the Exchange of Letters between Rajiv Gandhi and Jayewardene said: *"India will deport all Sri Lankan citizens who are found to be engaging in terrorist activities or advocating separatism or secessionism"*. There was always the danger that we could be caught up in that, had I continued to refer to Tamil Eelam! We arranged for all our books, documents, bound newspaper files etc. to be made into thirty to forty seaworthy packages, in the hope of enlisting the help of the Indian intelligence people to ship them to Jaffna. (Alas, that never happened, and the bulk of the material painstakingly built by me was irretrievably lost for us). We had been occupying two opposite flats, one of which we gave up, but retained the other temporarily. My friend Kantha at the TIC, London, had decided to close down the London office as well, despite the pleadings of many friends. He was to come to Madras and leave for Jaffna to continue with some humanitarian projects for which he had got the required funding. I remember Dr.Brian Seneviratne who had grown to respect Kantha for his silent selfless service to the Tamil community phoning me from Australia to tell me with friendly impudence: "Can't you stop this man from closing down the London Centre and getting back to Sri Lanka? Tell him, there will be no peace after this peace agreement!" Brian was prophetic, but Kantha's mind was made up. As to what eventually happened to him in Jaffna was a sad, tragic story that has been told elsewhere.

Two days after my return from Jaffna, I had a visitor. It was Balakumar of EROS. Having heard of my visit to Jaffna he wanted to know my impressions there. In the course of the chat he told me that he and most of his comrades were also getting back. "As you know, we may have nothing much in common with the LTTE ideologically, but yet they are a deciding factor in our struggle. We don't want to contest elections or get involved politically. But much could be done by working with the people in the grassroots." That summed up what he told me, if not in so many words. EROS of course had a twin track in their methods, one represented by Balakumar, and the other by Shankar Rajee, who was once introduced to me by "founding father" Ratnasabapathy as his "*varisu*", meaning his political heir. It was Padmanabha of EPRLF, (later

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killed by LTTE,) who claimed in private conversation with me and two others that they had tapped and overheard the EROS order (not by Balakumar) that went from Madras to Jaffna to "finish off" Kanthasamy! There was no doubt that the Tamil liberation struggle had its ugly, sordid side as well.

10 October 1987 was D-Day when the Indian army went to war with the LTTE, but what in effect turned out to be a war against the Eelam Tamil population. It was only three months earlier they had welcomed the Indian jawans with open arms, such was their pathetic trust in "Mother India"! Several noteworthy events were to lead to that fateful day. Pirabakaran who was flown back to Jaffna on 2 August made his public appearance in Jaffna on 4 August. A massive crowd greeted him at the Suthumalai Amman Temple grounds. Jaffna had never seen such a vast concourse of people. Hundreds perched themselves on the roof of the temple to get a better view of the rostrum, where Pirabakaran sat, with a large Tiger flag as the backdrop, and surrounded by Kittu and the regional commanders: "Mahattaya", Kumarappa and Pulendran. Yogi and Thileepan were other prominent leaders who were on view.

Pirabakaran's ***"We love India. We love the people of India"*** speech that day, described by an Indian commentator as "an interesting political exposition," was noted for its statesman-like restraint and candour. While expressing his apprehensions on the Accord, he said the responsibility of protecting the Tamils had now passed from the LTTE to the Indian government. They would however continue to fight for an independent Tamil Eelam.

The following day, 5 August, the scene shifted to the hangar at the Palaly airfield, when the ceremonial handing over of weapons by the LTTE took place. In a symbolic gesture, Yogi placed a Mauser pistol on the table, while Sri Lankan Defence Secretary Gen. Sepalla Attygalle touched it as a token of acceptance. It was significant that Yogi did not hand over the weapon to the Sri Lankan general, nor did the two shake hands. Attygalle, who spoke briefly handed over in turn a scroll offering amnesty to the combatants who

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laid down arms. Meanwhile, four LTTE pick-up vans with Tamil number plates and Tigers flags drew up with an assortment of weapons, which were handed over to members of the Indian Peace Keeping Force. While the proceedings seemed invested with excitement and high drama, the subdued manner in which Yogi acted his part, was an indication that the LTTE thought nothing much of it! Was Pirabakaran making a point when he chose Yogi, a political aide, instead of a military leader to perform that function? High Commissioner Dixit himself thought that the ceremonial handing over of weapons that day was "a farce". (*Assignment Colombo by J.N.Dixit, Konark Publishers Pvt Ltd. A-Main Vikas Marg, Delhi)*

In Colombo and in the south, the signing of the accord had led to a period of unrest and violence, inspired mainly by the JVP, who saw in the presence of Indian troops direct proof of their very theory of "Indian expansionism" they had been preaching since the 1970s. Apart from opposition from the SLFP, members of his own party and the Buddhist clergy, Jayawardene had to face threats to his own life. So seriously was the situation viewed in India that Rajiv Gandhi ordered an Indian destroyer to be stationed in Colombo harbour should the necessity arise to evacuate the President. On August 18, there did take place an attempt on Jayewardene's life, but luckily left the President unhurt. The Madras fortnightly *Frontline* reported in its issue of August 22-September 4 :

> *A shocking terrorist attack directed at President J.R.Jayewardene and the top UNP Government leadership on the morning of August 18 was a very close call. The murderous explosions occurred in quick succession as shots were fired and hand grenades were thrown into the committee room in the Parliament complex at Sri Jayewardena Pura, even as President Jayewardene, Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa and their colleagues were engaged in a meeting of the Government parliamentary group.*

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*Some 15 M.Ps, including five Ministers were injured – a few seriously, resulting in one death. Most notable politically among those hit was National Security Minister, Lalith Athulathmudali, who had suffered serious injuries and had to be operated upon in the abdominal region. ....The attack right within the heart of Parliament and aimed at the top people in power came in the midst of unprecedented security surveillance, because trouble from JVP terrorist elements was expected.* ***In the event there was a shocking breach of security – with eye-witnesses reporting the flinging open of the door to the committee room and the firing of shots and the tossing of the hand grenades at the President. One of the grenades reportedly bounced off the table where the President was seated and exploded to hit Athulathmudali, among others…..***

By mid-September, the Indian Peace Keeping Force had not succeeded either in keeping the peace or in disarming the Tigers, who reportedly went hunting EPRLF cadres in Batticaloa and killed eighty of them. Meanwhile, a new development in Jaffna saw the LTTE's chief of the propaganda wing, Rasiah Thileepan going on a fast unto death on 15 September. His demands were: the release of all political prisoners held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act; the end to State-sponsored Sinhala colonization of Tamil areas, the disarming of the paramilitary force called Home Guards and the closure of all army and police camps in Tamil areas. A non-violent protest such as this might not have been considered in character given the LTTE's belief in armed resistance, but the fast evoked strong emotions among the people. By the 20th, Thileepan was reported to be nearing death, and on the 25th, he passed away. Dixit, who was in Jaffna expressed his deep condolences to Pirabakaran in person but thought *"given the progress made in the creation of an Interim Government it was a pity that a valuable life was lost" (Assignment Colombo p.205).*

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The "Interim Government" that Dixit referred to was to set up a 12-member council that would govern the merged Northeast province. The LTTE was to have seven members, with two seats for the TULF, two members from the Sinhalese community and one representative of the Muslim community. The chairman of the council, who would be chief adminstrator, would also be a LTTE nominee. The EPRLF which lobbied New Delhi for inclusion was however left out. The arrangement nearly went through, but there was a last minute hitch. Jayewardene had opted for former Jaffna Municipal Commissioner C.V.K.Sivagnanam, to head the council among the three names submitted by the LTTE. But the LTTE insisted on N.Pathmanathan who hailed from the Eastern Province. Pathmanathan, an ex-civil servant, jailed by the government under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, was certainly not the kind of person whom the government would look with favour. The LTTE was unyielding and the interim proposals collapsed.

The situation reached a flashpoint on October 3 when a boat in which 17 LTTE personnel, including Trincomalee commander Pulendran, and Kumarappa, were traveling, was detained by the Sri Lankan navy off Point Pedro. The men were stripped of their cyanide capsules and handed over to the IPKF. Two days later, Sri Lanka insisted that the men should be transferred to Colombo for questioning. The Tigers protested that they were covered by the amnesty, and whatever weapons they carried were only personal weapons permitted under the Accord. Both Depinder Singh and Dixit appealed to Jayewardene not to precipitate the situation, but the hawkish Athulathmudali was adamant. He wanted to parade them in Colombo before TV cameras and mount a major propaganda exercise. But the Tigers had other plans. Mahattaya visited the cadres and had reportedly handed over the required cyanide capsules. Before Athulathmudali could achieve his plan, twelve of the seventeen men, including Pulendran and Kumarappa were dead. That altered the entire situation on the ground. The LTTE were in a vengeful mood and went on a violent spree and Colombo was furious at being cheated of their prize catch. Caught in the middle, the Indians lost their clout with both parties.

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Jayewardene told Depinder Singh that if the IPKF could not be equal to their task in maintaining peace and preventing Tiger violence against Sinhalese civilians, they could as well go back. Jayewardene's threat rattled Delhi. Defence Minister K.C.Pant was rushed for talks in Colombo, and Indian army chief General Krishnaswamy Sundarji flew to the northeast for an on-the-spot assessment. Jayewardene had his way. He withdrew his previous offer of amnesty, and announced a reward of one million rupees on Pirabakaran's head. Despite a last-minute effort by Depinder Singh to avoid a IPKF- LTTE confrontation, the battle lines had begun to be drawn. Early on October 10, the Indian army blew up the LTTE radio and TV stations and bombed and destroyed the pro-LTTE Tamil newspapers, Eelamurasu and Murasoli. The "peace-keepers" had launched their war on the Tigers.

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# Chapter 23

## 1988: Peacemakers at war ; Sinhala South rebels; Jayawardene's exit.

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# 1988: Peacemakers at war ; Sinhala South rebels; Jayawardene's exit.

Superpowers, whether regional or global, suffer from two disabilities when they go to war. *One*: They have a propensity towards miscalculation. The tendency is to underestimate the enemy. *Two*: Used to conventional warfare, equipped as they are with overpowering military might, they become clueless facing highly committed guerrillas. Regional super power India was an example of the above, as was America in Vietnam and the Soviets in Afghanistan. When India took on the Tamil Tigers on October 10, 1987, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in Delhi was talking of "some 2000 boys"! He was depending on the intelligence supplied to him by the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's equivalent to the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

(The Indians have a genius for using happy euphemisms for inconvenient facts; the warring Indian army was known as a "peace-keeping force" and one would think the Research and Analysis Wing was some innocuous academic body, something on the lines of the Marga Institute in Sri Lanka!)

Having decided to launch a massive military offensive against the Tigers, (what they termed "Operation Pawan", pawan in Hindi meaning wind) the first thing the Indians did was to muzzle all organs of protest and dissent. They seized the LTTE's radio and TV stations, and bombed the printing presses of the two Tamil dailies, the Eelamurasu and Murasoli. The next step was to treble the numbers of the Indian armed forces from 5,000 to 15,000. India thus became in effect a mercenary force fighting the Tigers and the Tamil people on behalf of Mr.Jayewardene! Having "threatened" Sri Lanka

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from taking over Jaffna city during its "Operation Liberation" in June, India was now all set to do the same.

On Day 2 itself after the Indian offensive began, the IPKF was to meet with an initial disaster. In the belief - through intercepting LTTE radio communications - that Pirabakaran was staying in the vicinity of the Jaffna University, it was decided to launch a surprise commando raid on the night of October 11. The objective was to take him either alive or dead, and thereby deal an early psychological blow. Over 100 paratroopers were dropped by helicopters under cover of darkness in the grounds of the University. Little did they know that the Tigers were waiting in ambush anticipating that very move. According to unofficial sources, over 30 of the paratroopers were mowed down even before they could get over the shock and 18 others taken prisoner. The rest of them were pinned down for 24 hours and were eventually rescued by Indian army tanks which provided the cover to escape (India Today, Cover Story, Sri Lanka- A BLOODIED ACCORD, Eye witness Account. In the Tigers' Den. November 15, 1987)

Dilip Bobb, reporting for India Today, quoted Sepoy Lok Ram, 38, of the 1st Para Regiment who was one of those wounded, as saying:

> We thought everything was fine but when we were sliding out of the seventh helicopter, we suddenly came under heavy fire from all sides. It was an impossible situation as people would come out of the houses and fire at us and then disappear. There were gunmen on treetops, even on top of coconut trees. Since we were not using heavy weapons, it was impossible to advance. We were surrounded by an enemy we could not even see.

He quotes another sepoy, Govindan of the Madras Regiment as saying, perhaps exaggeratedly,

> It was impossible to say who was a tiger and who was not.

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> Everyone, male or female, above the age of 10, could be armed and dangerous. We saw little girls producing guns from under their frocks and shooting at us. How do you fight them?

Indian photographer Shyam Tekwani who, in overcoming his national sentiment, was to produce the first and perhaps finest candid shots in colour from the war zone for the same issue of *India Today*, had also an interesting story to tell his magazine. He was taken into Jaffna, skirting the advancing IPKF columns, by the LTTE, and spent five days with them, witnessing actual battle scenes. Some excerpts from his long report:

> In their shorts or lungis, with beardless faces and bare feet, they look but battle-hardened guerrillas who have taken on the might of the fourth largest army in the world. Many are barely in their teens, some are young women, none looks a day older than 30. Yet, with the lethal weaponry they wield with such proficiency , the revolutionary zeal in their eyes, their intimate knowledge of the local terrain and their absolute disdain for death they have managed to give the 20,000 strong IPKF such a run for its money.
>
> Spending five days with the Tigers at the height of the battle, I saw sights that despite the occasional brutality and callousness for human life the Tigers display, evoke reluctant respect. I saw one LTTE guerrilla, shot in the stomach, calmly swallow a cyanide capsule rather than hold up his companions in the battlefield. I saw a stunningly beautiful young woman standing proudly in the middle of the road with an AK-47 in one hand and a comb in the other. Their confidence and exuberance in the face of near-certain annihilation by a superior force are remarkable.
>
> In the middle of an all-out war, it appeared unreal to hear them laughing and jabbering away like the kids they were.....

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The commando operation of October 11 that ended in humiliating failure was a great blow to the IPKF's morale. But the plan to take Jaffna city went ahead in a five-pronged operational axes from the north, eventually linking up with the garrison from within the Jaffna fort. The capture of the city after two long weeks of fierce fighting, and achieved with heavy casualties had none of the honour and glory that goes with a victorious campaign. The IPKF admitted to 214 dead, including 15 officers, two of them colonels. 36 soldiers were reported missing, while over 700 were wounded. Unofficially however, it was believed that the IPKF death toll could be closer to 400. Apart from loss of lives, the Indian government was reported to be incurring Rs.3 crores a day in sustaining the military operations. But how about the Jaffna people in terms of human lives, suffering, displacement from their habitats and loss of property? Even conservative estimates placed the number of civilians killed at over a hundred . *India Today* testified to one eye- witness account of an incident in which Mi-24 helicopter gunships bombed and strafed Chavakachcheri killing 20 civilians. To its credit, the journal also testified to the fact that shells had landed in the main market place and the main bus stand where large numbers of civilians had gathered. But the worst bloodbath happened on October 21 when jumpy Indian soldiers blundered their way into the Jaffna hospital, shooting at random, and killing more than twenty victims, among them, doctors, nurses and hospital staff. In Colombo Prime Minister Premadasa taunted India by accusing the IPKF of "genocide", obviously as a riposte to the similar charge against Sri Lanka made by Indian Minister for External Affairs, Bhagat in 1986.

Despite the capture of Jaffna, there was understandable disappointment in India, both in political and military circles over the slow progress in implementing the terms of the accord. Maj.-General Harkirat Singh said that his men took orders from the Indian government and from no one else, which statement infuriated Colombo. Indian army chief Gen.Sundarji said there was no question of IPKF withdrawal until the LTTE lay down their arms. Rhetoric apart, there was a move on the part of both the LTTE and the Indian government to come to terms. Gen.Harkirat Singh was recalled and Lt.Gen.

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A.S.Kalkat was sent in his place. The LTTE freed the 18 IPKF prisoners, and India announced a unilateral 48-hour cease-fire to enable the LTTE to surrender arms. The LTTE however wanted the IPKF to pull back to the October 9 position, as a condition for laying down arms, a condition which naturally was totally unacceptable to India. It was back to Square One, with the LTTE leadership having slipped past the IPKF cordon in the peninsula and safely ensconced in the Vanni jungles, dictating terms from there.

While the Indian government was feeling frustrated in its political aims in the northeast, Jayewardene was facing a formidable Sinhala backlash in the South. The root cause of the problem lay in the hastily forged "Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Agreement" itself. India's role under both Mrs.Gandhi as well as her son Rajiv has been one of offering good offices to resolve the conflict between the two contending parties – the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil militants. But in a sudden turnaround, instead of helping the parties to the conflict to sign a peace agreement, the Rajiv Gandhi government took the illogical step of signing an agreement with one of the parties. It was as some Indian commentator said, a case of the officiating priest marrying the bride! Moreover, the Agreement itself was drawn up in the face of opposition from not only the SLFP but also from influential members of Jayewardene's own Cabinet, notably Premadasa and Lalith Athulathmudali. The Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) which had been dormant since its ill-fated insurrection of 1971 reared its head again. The dramatic resurgence of the JVP was shown in the way it unleashed anti-UNP violence in the South on a scale never seen before. Suspected of having killed some 200 officials and UNP supporters since the signing of the Accord, the JVP gunned down UNP chairman Harsha Abeywardene in broad daylight on a busy street on 23 December.

Two days later, the spotlight turned on Tamil Nadu. Chief Minister M.G.R. who had been ailing for some time and undergoing treatment in the United States passed away in Madras. His death left a political vacuum in the state and the succession struggle in the AIADMK between his wife Janaki and his paramour Jayalalitha overshadowed for a time events in Sri Lanka.

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The orgy of violence in south Sri Lanka continued throughout 1988, while in the Northeast, the IPKF tried to bring in some semblance of administration in Jaffna. But faced with a militarily confident LTTE calling the shots from the vast jungle cover of the Vanni mainland, with an unseen presence in the peninsula itself, there was no sign of the normalcy that Rajiv Gandhi had claimed in Delhi. In fact he was coming under increasing pressure from the Sinhala south to take his troops back. President Jayewardene was getting politically isolated from his own party and his own people. He was looking less and less as an all-powerful president, and more and more as a mere protégé of India. While India tried to polish his image by inviting him to be chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations in Delhi on January 26, his own Prime Minister launched a severe indictment on the IPKF in parliament in Colombo. He was joined by National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali and the SLFP's Anura Bandaranaike. Mrs.Bandaranaike also joined in the chorus, while outside Parliament the JVP continued its killings of those who supported the Accord. **The most damning assassination took place on February 15, when Vijaya Kumaranatunge, who had the potential and charisma to emerge as a leader with probity and vision was shot dead.** A popular Sinhala film idol, he was in the process of leading a credible "Third Force" away from the murky politics of the SLFP and the UNP. The country reacted to his killing with a sense of revulsion. His death left his wife Chandrika as a widow like her mother, who had not approved of her daughter's marriage to a man who was not only a Christian, but coming from a caste far removed from the Kandyan *goigama* aristocracy.

As far as the July 29 "peace agreement" was concerned, there was not only no peace in sight, but the entire credibility of the agreement was at stake. India could not make any headway either in defeating the LTTE militarily, or in reviving the political process. The Tamil people who had such pathetic faith in India and who had welcomed the IPKF with garlands and great hopes were left with such shattering disillusionment after the first two weeks of war that there was no immediate hope of winning their "hearts and minds". India took the easy option of trying to regroup the Tamil militant groups opposed

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to the LTTE, notably the EPRLF, which had a modicum of support in the east. It was then decided that the only way to revive the political process was to hold elections to the temporarily merged (subject to a referendum on or before 31st December,1988) North-East Provincial Council. The Agreement had stipulated in Section 2.8 that *"elections to Provincial Councils will be held within the next three months, in any event before 31 December 1987"*. Although Provincial Council elections had taken place in all the six of the seven Sinhala majority provinces, the Tamil areas in north and east, were left high and dry. Nearly one year had passed without the promised elections taking place. Although decision makers in Delhi were of opinion that *"as long as the LTTE remained outside the process the exercise will be fraught with uncertainties"*, says Dixit, "*it was felt that India had no choice but to go ahead."* (Assignment Colombo, J.N.Dixit,1998)

This dilemma that faced the Rajiv Gandhi government only went to show the amount of miscalculation that preceded the signing of the Accord. However, in a bid to get out of the quagmire, RAW officials kept maintaining informal talks with Kittu and "Baby" Subramaniam who were under detention in Madras. A blunder by the IPKF in killing "Johnny", Kittu's secret emissary to Pirabakaran in his jungle hide-out, ended any hopes of rapprochement with the LTTE. "Johnny" had gone with RAW blessings and was flown to Vavuniya by the Indian Air Force. The LTTE was furious, the IPKF pleaded misunderstanding, but the damage was done. In Delhi meanwhile, there was some alarm following a remark made by Minister Athulathmudali, that the LTTE might be making secret approaches to the Sri Lankan government. Indian Defence Minister K.C.Pant made another dash to Colombo on a damage-limitation exercise and after talks with Dixit and Jayewardene announced a token withdrawal of Indian troops. That of course made no difference to the JVP's ongoing anti-Indian and anti-Jayewardene campaign. A nervous government declared a 48-hour curfew in Colombo and in the south on July 29, 1988, the first anniversary of the signing of the Agreement.

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On September 9, Jayewardene issued a proclamation merging (temporarily) the northern and eastern provinces, and on November 19, elections to the Council were held amidst violence, mainly in the north. The LTTE, as expected, boycotted the elections and the JVP in the south campaigned against it. But in a doubtful exercise in democracy, with strong-arm methods used by the EPRLF under the benign patronage of the Indian government and the IPKF, the EPRLF and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) shared the spoils, with 19 and 17 seats respectively. The Eelam National Democratic Liberation Front (ENDLF), another anti-LTTE group that enjoyed Indian patronage was also co-opted into the formation of a North East Provincial Government (NEPG). On December 10, Varadaraja Perumal, now in safari suit, and used to smoking foreign cigarettes, assumed the post of Chief Minister of the NEPG with its headquarters in Trincomalee. His cabinet had Tamil, Muslim and even a Sinhalese Minister in Dayan Jayatileka, son of the senior Sri Lankan journalist Mervyn de Silva. The circumstances under which he joined the Perumal cabinet are unclear, but he was known to be an admirer of the EPRLF chief Padmanabha.

The NEPG was eager to get down to business and soon set up a good-looking administrative machinery. The man appointed as Secretary to the Chief Minister was K.Vigneswaran, once involved in the Ministry of Soil Research under the Sri Lankan government, and married to a Sinhalese, who in the post-1983 period had his base in Madras. Working in close co-ordination with Chandrahasan and RAW, he never tired of talking about the impending achievement of Tamil Eelam that was due either the next Pongal or Christmas! Four years later, when an Eelam liaison office was set up in New Delhi, (with the help of Dr.Subramaniam Swamy I was told), and headed by ex-Sri Lankan diplomat Lakshmi Naganathan, "Victor" as he was known, found himself working with her, along with two assistants. The Eelam Liaison Office however had a short life of eight months and closed down in October 1987. The chain-smoking Lakshmi who called on this writer in Madras soon after, was obviously not too pleased with the goings-on in the Delhi office, with even the two assistants conspiring against each other.

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Victor was now in his third avatar as Perumal's secretary.

Meanwhile, the scene shifted to Colombo with the UNP nominee for the Presidential election Ranasinghe Premadasa defeating the SLFP nominee Mrs.Bandaranaike at the election held on December 19. End-1988 marked the political exit of Jayewardene – the man who had brought the country to its miserable pass. The heavy burden of tackling at the same time three forces, the IPKF, the LTTE and the JVP, he bequeathed to his successor.

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# Chapter 24

## 1989: LTTE-Premadasa talks and Assassinations

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# 1989 : LTTE-Premadasa talks and Assassinations

Recurring ethnic violence has been a feature of Sri Lankan life since 1956. But what began with the induction of the Indian "Peace Keeping Force" on July 29,1987, and continued through 1988, was shedding of blood of a different kind. Sinhalese turned against Sinhalese in the south, while Tamils turned against Tamils in the north and east, with the difference in the south being, that it had all the elements of a civil war. 1989 was to witness violence of the worst sort, and when the year ended, the country had even lost count of the killings. The average daily death toll of 25 crossed on some days the 100 and on a few occasions even the 200 mark! Among the thousands who were killed were Members of Parliament, Buddhist monks, and several top bureaucrats, both male and female.

The one who survived an assassination attempt was the SLFP leader Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Having lost her presidential contest with Premadasa, she was to lead the party's campaign for the parliamentary elections that were fixed for February 15. On the 5th, while waiting to address a campaign meeting at Hingurakgoda, three bombs were thrown at her. Firing broke out, and fortunately she was pushed to the ground by her bodyguards, to avoid being hit. She was lucky to escape the fate that befell her husband and her son-in-law.

When a country begins to lose count of the killings, there is always the danger of uninvolved citizens getting desensitised to the enormity of what

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they are witnessing. It takes an outsider to see it in perspective. A writer from *The Guardian*, London, Jasper Becker, writing for his paper (26 September 1989), Said:

> **Most people estimate that more than 10,000 people have died over the last ten months, making the undeclared civil war in Sri Lanka the world's bloodiest conflict. The world made such a fuss about Tiananmen Square, but how many died? A thousand out of a population of one billion. But here, this has become Asia's new killing field and no on seems to notice ....**

Writing under the title – *MURDER IN THE CEYLONESE STYLE* the *Guardian* writer says:-

> I had not expected to be faced with the horror so soon, but driving from the airport into Colombo we found the road was blocked on the bridge over the Kelani river. People had stopped their vehicles and a small crowd was gazing at the muddy monsoon waters swirling below.
>
> What are they looking at?" I asked idly, thinking that perhaps a ceremony was taking place. "Bodies. They come here to see the corpses floating down the river", said the friend who picked me up. Every day the bodies float past, and on one day this week 50 were seen drifting together where an eddy in the river gathered them. At first I couldn't quite make out the objects floating in the water, but there were big black crows perched on them.
>
> My friend said they were always youths, their faces slashed to prevent identification and their genitals often removed. People believe that the death squads remove them as evidence of the successful elimination of a JVP (People's Liberation Front) terrorist.

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> Bodies are found everywhere in Sri Lanka : on the beaches, along the roadsides, in the jungles, and in the towns. It is now customary to prevent recognition by burning the bodies with tyres, but others are thrown into the rivers as a warning to the living.....

Running parallel to the ongoing violence, the political landscape both in India and Sri Lanka was also undergoing a sea change with the emergence of new faces in high places. The election of **Ranasinghe Premadasa** as President of Sri Lanka and in Tamil Nadu the return to power after thirteen years of DMK leader **Muthuvel Karunanidhi** were to make a significant impact in the politics of both countries. At the national level itself, there was a new dispensation in Delhi in November 1989. The Congress-I was voted out of power and Rajiv Gandhi had ceased to be Prime Minister. The new man in, **V.P.Singh**, was already committed to a phased withdrawal of the Indian troops from Sri Lanka.

Taking his oaths as President from the Dalada Maligawa (The Temple of the Tooth) in Kandy at the auspicious time of 10.40 on January 1, 64-year old Premadasa followed his speech in Sinhala with a short speech in Tamil as well, and then spoke in English. One of his first acts on assuming power was to lift the emergency laws that had been in force for over five and a half years. Getting India to withdraw the IPKF was part of his election promise.

General elections for the country's ninth parliament were fixed for February 15, and the polls campaign was marked by a reign of terror, following a boycott call by both the JVP and the LTTE. In the south, security personnel were fired at, polling booths were set on fire, buses were burnt, and at least 67 persons were reported killed. . The UNP won 125 out of the 225 seats, while the SLFP got 67. **The real surprise of the elections was the humiliating defeats of the entire TULF leadership. Secretary General of the party A.Amirthalingam, who knew he stood no chance anywhere in Jaffna, decided to contest from Batticaloa, but lost. The other casualties were the**

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**party president M.Sivasithamparam, and former M.Ps R.Sampanthan, V.Yogeswaran and Neelan Tiruchelvam.**

The mistake made by the TULF was to field a common slate of candidates in consort with the pro-Accord, anti-LTTE groups – the EPRLF, the ENDLF and TELO. They were to contest under the TULF ticket as there was no time to register a new party or front. Under the proportional representation system of elections, though there were only 31 seats in the five electoral districts in the north-eastern province, the contesting parties could file three additional names for each district. The TULF-led front filed in all a list of 46 names, in which the voter could show his party preference as also his preference of the first three candidates. The TULF fielded the largest number of 17 candidates, followed by the EPRLF (11), and the ENDLF and TELO nine each. While calling for a boycott of the elections, the LTTE secretly passed the word around that all the independent candidates contesting under the EROS name had their support. The EROS did no public campaigning, but merely issued a statement saying their intention in contesting the elections was not to enter parliament, but only to test their strength and popularity. The electors in the north gave EROS their overwhelming support, and at the end of the day, EROS had 13 seats in parliament as against 10 to the TULF-led front. True to their word, the EROS candidates did not take their seats in parliament.

Ten days before the elections, the LTTE had denounced the TULF in a strongly-worded statement saying:

> Having wasted six years in self-imposed exile in the Madras guest house and having alienated themselves from the political struggle when the Tamil people faced genocide from the armed forces and the Indian troops, these self-seeking politicians are now begging our people to elect them to the Sri Lankan parliament.

Perhaps it was a foretaste of more grave things to come.

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There were however more important developments happening in a rapidly evolving scenario. With the exit of one of the two signatories to the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement and with all shades of Sinhala opinion united against the Indian presence, the Accord was in virtual tatters. Premadasa seized the hour and extended an olive branch to both the JVP and the LTTE. Both were victims of social, economic, and political injustice, he said and that was the reason why they were engaged in their struggles. He invited them for talks and followed it up by announcing a six-day cease-fire to mark the Sinhala and Tamil New Year. The IPKF had no option but to put up with it. The Sinhala and Tamil New Year brought the biggest surprise. The Tigers signalled their acceptance of Premadasa's invitation for talks.

The news caught the Indian government, the hostile Indian media and the LTTE's Tamil adversaries on the wrong foot. The reactions, as was to be expected, were adverse, if not angry. There was some puzzlement among Tamils themselves. Have the Tigers forgotten the past? Have they given up their goal of Tamil Eelam? Writing in the *Lanka Guardian* of June 1, 1989, I said:

> But what chances are there of the LTTE – Premadasa talks yielding any tangible benefits to the Tamil people? – this is a question that every Tamil will naturally want to ask. Before that, one must disabuse oneself of exaggerated notions about the ambit of the talks. Because the political objective of the LTTE is an independent Tamil homeland, it does not follow that the motive and the nature of the talks will centre round fundamental objectives. It cannot and it would be naïve on any one's part to expect it. If it were that easy a proposition to win Tamil Eelam across the table, there cannot be any sense or rationale in waging an armed struggle at tremendous sacrifice of lives. What then could be the justification or explanation for the talks from the Tamil point of view?

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> To answer that question one has to take cognisance of an unhappy reality; the momentum of the Eelam struggle had been pushed back by at least two years as a result of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and Indian military intervention on Eelam soil. To carry forward the Eelam struggle, the ground has to be controlled by forces that stand for that political objective. Two years ago that control existed, but today it is no longer so. We have a powerful alien, military force that has taken physical control of the ground, involved in crushing the Eelam struggle, aided by other indigenous forces that have given up the Eelam objective in exchange for perks of office and an opportunity for revenge. This situation has to be reversed and this is well within the parameters of the talks the LTTE was prepared to hold with the Premadasa government.

On April 26, the LTTE's accredited representative Anton Balasingham flew into Colombo with his wife Adele, and held discussions of a "preparatory nature" with senior officials nominated by President Premadasa. Discussions were to continue after other members of the LTTE arrived in the capital. In a dramatic development on May 3, a Sri Lankan Air Force helicopter flew in two leaders of the LTTE's political wing. Yogaratnam Yogi and "Murthi" accompanied by seven armed bodyguards in camouflage uniforms. They were picked up from Nedunkerni in the northern Vavuniya district. Dressed in military fatigues, some of the LTTE's security personnel were seen taking still photographs and video film after landing at the air force grounds in the city. Earlier, Balasingham and Adele, along with four Sri Lankan newsmen were flown to the Vavuniya jungles. Communicating with his walkie-talkie, Balasingham located the area for the chopper to land. A white flag in a jungle clearing identified the spot for the landing.

Where was the IPKF when all these chopper take-offs and landings were taking place, in terrain where they were engaging the Tigers in war? Interviewed by a Colombo newspaper, India's new High Commissioner in

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Colombo L.L.Mehrotra, claimed that they were approached to facilitate the exit of LTTE negotiators from their jungle hide-outs. "A request was made to us at very short notice and we did everything to make it possible", he said.

With talks with the LTTE proceeding "satisfactorily", Premadasa came out with the demand that India must pull out its forces by end-July. The Indian reaction was to intensify the IPKF war against the Tigers. This could be a serious impediment to the progress of the talks, as the Tigers were clearly aware. Premadasa's problems at this stage, were not those concerning the timing of the IPKF withdrawals, but the domestic crisis caused by the JVP in calling for bus strikes, harbour strikes and the continued killings of policemen, politicians and ordinary people. The government re-imposed the state of emergency, and imposed censorship on the Press. The intention was clear. The JVP was to be dealt with ruthlessly and that accounted for the hundreds of floating corpses in the rivers and the mutilated bodies everywhere.

Amidst this confused picture in the country, there occurred a shocking incident on July 13. TULF leader Amirthalingam and former Jaffna M.P. Vettivelu Yogeswaran were shot dead in a high security residential family complex at Buller's Road, Colombo. M.Sivasithamparam, the party president who was also present at the tragic scene escaped with his life but with serious injuries. The assassins were reported to be two hard-core LTTE activists Visu and Aloysius, who had come by appointment to have discussions with the TULF leaders. It was said that in a shoot-out by the security personnel both of them were killed and a third LTTE visitor was arrested.

Visu and Aloysius were both known to Yogeswaran and apparently on friendly terms with him, and had even visited him at the same address on four occasions earlier, according to testimony given by Mrs.Sarojini Yogeswaran. It was known that despite the LTTE's animosity towards the TULF leadership Yogeswaran had at all times tried to bridge the widening gulf between his party and the militants. The assassins' real target, if at all, would have been Amirthalingam. There was no indication that they had come on a "suicide

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mission" either. The exact circumstances under which Yogeswaran was killed would have been known only to the surviving witness Sivasithamparam (whose testimony was not publicised) or to the eight bodyguards who manned the place and some of whom shot dead Visu and Aloysius. The bodyguards, composed of both Tamil and Sinhalese police personnel were reported to have been resentful that the LTTE visitors were allowed on Yogeswaran's intervention to come armed into the premises at all times.

Newspaper reports said that the two gunmen were themselves "killed in the shoot-out that ensued" but Mrs.Yogeswaran's testimony before the magistrate left some questions unanswered. She had said:

> "…. The visitors arrived and he (Yogeswaran) went upstairs. They were talking for about 15 minutes when Mr.Amirthalingam and Mr.Sivasithamparam joined them to commence discussions. My husband asked for two glasses of passion fruit juice and a cup tea and also told me not to disturb them. From the pantry where I was preparing tea, I heard them laughing and talking and having a seemingly friendly chat. All of a sudden I heard several gun shots. I ran into the room where they were. I found my husband on the floor with several gunshot injuries. Mr.Amirthalingam was also bleeding profusely from a number of wounds…."

If a shoot-out between the gunmen and the bodyguards were to occur in the midst of laughter and a friendly chat it stands to reason that there must have been some sudden unexpected provocation. What that provocation was did not emerge in the various testimonies.

*(Yogeswaran's tragedy was he was a militant at heart but a politician through convenience. A man with an amiable disposition and endowed with a trusting nature, he was also an admirer of the LTTE. He once described to me in detail Pirabakaran's prowess with the pistol! Despite the fact that the SATURDAY REVIEW edited by this writer had been consistently critical of the TULF policies at that time, Yoges was a regular visitor at our Chapel*

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*Road office in 1982, engaging in good-hearted banter. He was to remain a good friend both in Jaffna and later in India).*

The bodies of the two leaders were taken to Trincomalee and Batticaloa where thousands of people gathered to pay their respects and on the 17th, the cremation took place at the Jaffna Central College grounds near the Chelvanayakam memorial. Tens of thousands of people gathered at the funeral, which was attended by Indian Minister of State for External Affairs Natwar Singh, Indian High Commissioner L.L.Mehrotra and Gamini Dissanayake, representing the Colombo government.

Five days later, unconnected with the TULF leaders' assassination, the body of PLOTE leader Uma Maheswaran , alias Mukundan, was found down a street in Bambalapitiya. He had been shot thrice in the chest, once in the face (which was badly mutilated) and once in the stomach. Coming soon after the Amirthalingam-Yogeswaran assassination the temptation was to ascribe the killing to the LTTE, but the fact that he had "vanished" from his residence the previous day and the manner in which he was shot pointed to a dissident group within the PLOTE . It later transpired that there had been arguments within the group over enormous assets belonging to the PLOTE over which Uma Maheswaran had personal custody.

One week after the cremation of the TULF leaders, came the most diabolical piece of disinformation ever perpetrated on the Indian and Sri Lankan public. LTTE leader Pirabakaran was "dead!" – went the word on the grapevine, "killed by his deputy "Mahattaya". *THE HINDU* of Madras, known facetiously as "*The Mahavishnu of Mount Road"* in allowing wishful thinking to get the better of journalistic prudence, led the pack in its issue of July 24, under the headline – PIRABAKARAN REPORTED KILLED IN LTTE SHOOTOUT! India's State-owned electronic media, All India Radio and Doordashan followed. In Colombo, Lalith Athulathmudali announced the death at a meeting with foreign newsmen the same day. IPKF's poodle, Perumal, said he was absolutely certain that the man was dead.

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The most grotesque crime against newspaper ethics was the one perpetrated by the Brahmin-owned Tamil daily in Tamil Nadu, the *Dinamalar,* a paper published in five centres. It went to town on July 24 with a screaming 8-column headline on Page 1, with three double column photographs of the "deceased" Pirabakaran, the "assassin" Mahattaya, and for good measure one of Kittu, also "deceased". The paper came out with very graphic details of an audio cassette that was being circulated in which Mahattaya explains why he had to kill Pirabakaran. The body of Pirabakaran was kept at a place called Anandaperiyakulam, 15 miles from Vavuniya, the paper said. It also quoted Indian intelligence sources saying that increasing sounds of gun fights between the Pirabakaran and the Mahattaya factions were being heard within a radius of 15 kilometres. Meanwhile several LTTE men were surrendering to the IPKF! On the following day's issue, the paper gave the "news" that Pirabakaran's body, according to "authoritative sources" was being taken to his home town of Valvettiturai for burial!

While everyone could guess from where the fabrication originated, what could have been the motive, given the impossibility of hiding the truth for long? One possible explanation came from Janata Dal leader George Fernandes. A Madras report published in the *Indian Express* of August 1, said:

> Janata Dal leader George Fernandes has expressed fears that Indian intelligence agencies might have planted the rumour about LTTE leader Prabhakaran's death as part of their plan to kill him. In a letter to President R.Venkatraman, copies of which were released to the Press on Saturday, Mr.Fernandes said that he had reasons to believe that the Indian intelligence agencies "may have wanted to kill him". He said: "I must express my abhorrence of the crude attempt made by Indian government and its intelligence agencies to invent this story.

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What was the situation in Jaffna at this time? It was best expressed by Ganamailnathan, the editor of the largest circulated Tamil daily, the *Uthayan:*

> I am reluctant to speak to you or anyone because we have built up such antagonisms here that anything you say angers this group or that and often people die for displeasing the several masters we have .....we are slaving under so many guns, the EPRLF, the LTTE, the ENDLF, the IPKF. We see what is happening but we don't report it. I have opinions on political questions but I write about lighter things like fish. Slaves can't express opinions or have choices.....All we have is thugs of the EPRLF and an army on top which does not even speak our language...." ( Shankarshan Thakur, *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, 29 June 1989).

The IPKF is stuck like a fishbone in Jaffna's throat, they can't swallow it, they can't spit it out wrote *The Telegraph* reporter, but on July 29, the IPKF resumed its withdrawal. A batch of more than 600 men set sail for home. But the withdrawal, a token one anyway, was preceded by high tension. With four days to go for the July 29 deadline set by Premadasa for the withdrawal of the IPKF, the JVP began drumming up more anti-Indian protests, burnt down the factory of the Indian Hume Pipe Company at Piliyandala and threw hand bombs at Indian banks. Eighteen IPKF men were killed when a landmine in a predominantly Sinhalese area in Amparai blew up the vehicle in which they were travelling. COMMANDOS STAND BY TO RESCUE DIPLOMATS said an 8-column headline in the Bombay paper, *The Indian Post* dated July 27, 1989.

**The Colombo-based report said *INS Virat*, India's second aircraft carrier, was standing by, outside Sri Lankan territorial waters to fly in commandos should there be any serious threat to the life of Indian diplomats here in the next few days.** The cold war was in fact, "hotting up "

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at this stage! It was a case of Premadasa and LTTE vs. Rajiv and EPRLF. The commandos did land the next day, 60 of them, at the Ratmalana airport, with proper passports and visas, with consent from Premadasa and were housed in camps set up at the High Commissioner's residence. Nothing came out of the exercise, but it was possibly meant to be India's strong arm message to Colombo.

The LTTE- Premadasa dialogue continued with Kittu himself flying into Colombo in late October, while Premadasa's abrasive Minister of State for Defence Ranjan Wijeratne kept needling the Indian government and demanding the complete withdrawal of the IPKF by the end of the year. The departure of Indian troops fom Amparai led to the so-called "Tamil National Army" formed under Indian auspices storming a police station and killing 38 Muslim reserve policemen. This led to Lankan troops clashing with the TNA. The Tigers then moved in and with Sri Lankan permission took control of Amparai and Batticaloa town, killing in the process nearly100 ENDLF and TELO cadres.

The year ended with JVP chief Rohana Wijeweera shot dead by Sri Lankan forces after being arrested in his hideout in the Kandy district. The Indo-Sri Lanka relations meanwhile underwent a more relaxed period with the defeat of Rajiv Gandhi at the Indian elections and the installing of V.P.Singh as Prime Minister. The year however had seen more than 10,000 killings, most of them in the south and central parts of the country.

*Tailpiece:* Major distractions in the course of the year included the stupid misadventure in November of PLOTE cadres acting as mercenaries of a Maldivian ring leader to topple the government of President Gayoom. India rushed troops and quelled the attempt.

DMK M.P. V.Gopalaswamy's crossing the Palk Straits illegally on February 7, and his 24-day clandestine stay with the Tigers was however a happy adventure, although an annoyed Karunanidhi and DMK distanced themselves from his secret mission. Gopalaswamy, later to be known by his

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Tamil initials as Vaiko, gave a detailed interview about his experiences in the northern jungles to K.P.Sunil of the Illustrated Weekly of India.

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# Chapter 25

## 1990: Indian troops depart but the Sri Lankan war resumes, Fall of Mankulam

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# 1990: Indian troops depart but the Sri Lankan war resumes, Fall of Mankulam

It was not a tearful farewell when on March 24, 1990, the last of the Indian forces kicked the dust off Sri Lankan soil and headed for home. There was a sigh of relief all round, from President Premadasa, the LTTE, the Tamils, the Sinhalese, why, the poor Indian jawans themselves who were thrown into a war they did not understand, and for which they were not prepared. An injured Indian soldier recuperating in the military hospital at Pune and thoroughly shaken by his experience in Sri Lanka, had told an Indian journalist – "When we went in, we thought it was going to be a *danda* fight"! (*danda* in Hindi means stick).

When this last contingent of the IPKF under Lt.Gen.A.S.Kalkat reached Madras port, the soldiers were received with suitable ceremonies, but the most important personage who should have been there was missing. Chief Minister Karunanidhi explaining why he boycotted the reception, said that he had nothing against the brave soldiers of the IPKF, but by misusing them, the previous government had cost the lives of "5000 Lankan Tamils and 1,800 Indian soldiers". Only by way of disapproving Mr.Rajiv Gandhi's action, he did not participate in the function, he said in the Assembly later.

Karunanidhi who had all along held a deep-seated grudge against the LTTE, had come a long way since then. As Chief Minister he was only too eager to reciprocate the friendly gestures made by the LTTE and had two rounds of talks with LTTE representatives Anton Balasingham and Yogaratnam Yogi

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in Madras in December 1989 and in February 1990. While in opposition he used to watch his political rival MGR play the role of bridge-builder between the LTTE and the Congress-I government in Delhi. As a constituent of the National Front coalition government in Delhi he now relished the chance of playing that same role.

Karunanidhi stood his ground on another issue. When nearly 2,000 activists and supporters of the EPRLF, the ENDLF and TELO, along with their families, fled the country fearing the wrath of the Tigers and were brought to Madras in IPKF-chartered ships, he refused them permission to disembark. He did not want Tamil Nadu turned into a battlefield by rival militant groups, he said. The other southern states, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh showed no desire to want them either. Ultimately Prime Minister V.P.Singh persuaded Chief Minister of the Janata Dal government in Orissa, Biju Patnaik, to take them in. It was sad business for Perumal and his retinue who had only the other day, lorded over the people in the north and east acting as "the dirty arm" of the IPKF.

Disappointed and angry at the turn of events, Perumal flew into Delhi on 12 January, and told *The Independent*, Bombay correspondent in Delhi:

> I'm here now, and I'm going to stay here and tell everyone that it is India's credibility that is at stake in Sri Lanka. They can't sit back and hand us over to the wolves.

The strongly pro-LTTE, London-published *Tamil Voice International* (unfortunately muzzled by the Tigers themselves later), said in its editorial of 1st February 1990:-

> .....Defying the Colombo government on one hand, taking on the Tigers on the other, cut off from contact with his own people, Mr.Perumal was cooped in a military citadel in Trincomalee, luxuriating in the presence of the brass hats of the IPKF, cultivating a feeling of *joie de vivre*, and looking very

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much like a modern version of 'the Emperor without clothes' in an empire extending to a 3km radius within Trincomalee town.

Soon, the bottom began to fall off under his chair. First came the LTTE dialogue in Colombo resulting in a mutual ceasefire. Then came Mr.Rajiv Gandhi's increasing helplessness in dealing with the Premadasa Government, resulting in a formal commitment of a "deinduction"of the IPKF. Any hope that the Premadasa government might collapse under the weight of the JVP terror had receded. And then came the elections in India the exit of Rajiv Gandhi & Co. , the emergence of a new government composed of leaders who had all along believed that the very induction of the IPKF was a blunder.

***Today, in trying to raise a hysteria in India, Mr.Perumal resembles several tragic heroes of Shakespeare rolled into one: gloomy like Hamlet, jealous like Othello, betrayed like Julius Caesar, and ranting like King Lear. Sad. But not all the onions in Jaffna can help produce a single tear for Mr.Perumal, among Eelam Tamils.***

With the departure of the IPKF, the exit of the Rajiv Gandhi government, the decimation of the JVP, the virtual collapse of the North-East Provincial Council, and with Perumal's "Citizens' Volunteer Force" on the run, the only two players who now mattered in Sri Lankan politics were the Tigers and the Premadasa government. The cosiness between the two had persisted the first five months of the year, with the Tigers indicating their desire to join the political mainstream, following the Mahendrarajah (Mahattaya)-Premadasa talks. The People's Front of the Liberation Tigers (PFLT) had been duly registered as a political party with Mahattaya himself as President and Yogi as Secretary. (The naming of a military leader as head of the PFLT however robbed the political wing of much of its credibility.) There was no doubt however that Colombo had now learnt to accept the Tigers as

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legitimate partners in the country's political life. The joke used to do the rounds in Colombo that two "P"s - Premadasa and Pirabakaran were running the country. Sometimes the two "P"s were extended to three to include R.Paskaralingam, who as Treasury Secretary was the "eyes and ears" of Premadasa and reputedly wielding more power than Cabinet Ministers!

It was not altogether surprising at that time when veteran journalist Mervyn de Silva had Pirabakaran on the cover of his prestigious fortnightly – the *Lanka Guardian,* (January 1,1990) and declared him the "Man of the Decade". under the title – **Prabhakaran: The Eye of the Storm,** he wrote :

> It is the Tamil armed revolt that has made the strongest impact on Sri Lanka in the decade that has just ended.....In that struggle, there is one commanding personality, the LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran, regarded by many western experts as leader of one of the toughest guerrilla organisations in the world, and by military analysts as a "genius" in the theory of unconventional warfare. At least one Sri Lankan politician, now at the pinnacle of power, is on record as saying that he might have been an excellent choice as the island's army commander. Though a mere aside, it was no frivolous jest. .....
>
> A folk hero in Tamil Nadu, Prabhakaran's picture, HINDU editor N.Ram told me years ago, could be found in many a suburban home and remote hamlet in the South Indian state's rural areas. To the Indian newspaper reader too his is a familiar name. But his real claim to fame is that he got the world's fourth largest army bogged down in an increasingly futile war in Sri Lanka's north-east, threatening to convert a peace-keeping operation to India's Vietnam or Afghanistan. Or Lebanon vis-à-vis the Middle East major military power, Israel
>
> Prabhakaran's war will soon be a case-study in the Indian defence institutes. Internationally, Prabhakaran's name has

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probably be as widely publicised as President J.R's . So he is our choice as Lanka's man of the 80s.

On April 1, Pirabakaran made his first public appearance in two and a half years. Dressed in military fatigues, he spoke to local journalists at Nallur in Jaffna. While praising President Premadasa for his courageous and new approach towards the problems of the Tamils, he said however that they will not hesitate to take up arms again if the Sri Lankan government tried to suppress the Tamil liberation struggle like the former Indian government did. Battle-weary Jaffna had by now resumed normal life. After a 4-year lapse, the annual cricketing fixture between St.John's College and Jaffna Central took place, with Chundikuli girls cheering for St.John's and Vembadi girls rooting for Jaffna Central, as good an indication of normalcy as anything else. But alas, it so happened, good times never lasted for long for the Jaffna man.

One time Foreign Minister and later Justice Minister in Premadasa's government Shaul Hameed in his role as trouble shooter, made valiant efforts to see that the LTTE-Premadasa relations did not sour. He made several flying trips to Jaffna and had talks with LTTE leaders. But Pirabakaran had made it clear that there was no question of disarming until Tamils won all their rights. Hameed was known to appreciate the LTTE's stand, but if Hameed with his good spoken Tamil was the "dove" in the negotiation process, (he was the only Sri Lankan Minister to have met Pirabakaran), Premadasa had a "hawk" in his Minister of State for Defence, Ranjan Wijeratne. A distressing fact of life is that in most such situations the hawks are the ones who have the day. On June 11, to the surprise of many, the Tigers went on the attack, and what was dubbed by journalists as Eelam War II, had begun.

On the 11th and 12th June, the Tigers were reported to have overrun six police stations in the Batticaloa district – Kalkudah, Valaichenai, Batticaloa, Eravur, Vellaveli and Kalawanchikudy, and also seized nearly 600 small arms and 70,000 rounds of ammunition. Several army camps in Amparai were also under attack. In the north, the Point Pedro and Kankesanturai police stations

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had been seized. The Vavuniya and the Kiran police stations were evacuated for tactical reasons, government said. The Tigers had also mounted attacks at Mannar and Murunkan. Taken by surprise by the suddenness and speed with which the Tigers had taken the initiative, the government however rushed reinforcements to both north and east by air. Helicopter gunships, SIA Marchetti aircraft and patrol boats were placed at the service of General Denzil Kobbekaduwe, overall commander of the military operations.

What provoked the Tigers to launch that onslaught? Whatever the reason given, it was farcical. According to a statement made by Ranjan Wijeratne in parliament, a Muslim youth was found with a married Sinhalese woman inside the refugee camp at Batticaloa town. The woman's husband had assaulted the youth. The quarrel had been settled by a policeman on guard duty at the camp. Subsequently both the husband and the Muslim youth were produced at the Batticaloa police station. Both of them had minor injuries. The Muslim youth happening to be a tailor of LTTE uniforms, the Tigers had intervened on his behalf, forced their way into the Batticaloa police station, and taken it over. It was obvious of course the case of the Muslim tailor was only a red herring.

Political analysts who express puzzlement over LTTE's actions, and Sri Lankan critics who accuse the Tigers of breaking cease-fires fail to note one expedient the Tigers always employ – they never allow the opponent to strike first. While an element of trust was required when opponents talk to each other, neither of them is expected to drop its guard. The Russians have a proverb – *"Doveryai, no proveryai"* which means "Trust, but Verify". What the Tigers were able to verify was that the never ending dialogue was not producing any tangible returns. Their demand that the virtually defunct North-East Provincial Council be dissolved was not met. Their request that the Sixth Amendment be repealed to enable them to contest elections was not getting any hearing. What offended them most was while Hameed was talking to them on one hand, Ranjan Wijeratne was on the other hand holding talks with some EPRLF representatives.

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One week after the war began, there took place in Madras the bloodiest carnage that the city had seen. On June 19, EPRLF chief Padmanabha, and 14 others including Finance Minister in the defunct North-East Council, Kirupakaran and other councillors were killed in a hail of bullets in the apartment they occupied at Zachariah Colony in Kodambakkam An EPRLF M.P. Yogasankari was among those who succumbed to injuries later. Padmanabha who was in Orissa and later in Delhi had come to Madras only the previous day, and had in fact gone to the apartment only a few hours earlier, which meant that the assassins had intimate knowledge of his movements. Suspicion obviously fell on the Tigers. But because some unexploded grenades had Sri Lankan service issue markings, commonly used by the STF and the weapons used were suspected to be T-56 rifles of the kind issued to Sri Lankan forces, another version had it that the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) led by Douglas Devananda might have been responsible. Devananda, it would be remembered was sacked from the EPRLF earlier after a shooting incident in Choolamedu. The widespread assumption however was that the Tigers were responsible for the massacre. The assassins of course were never caught despite a police dragnet throughout the State and along the coast.

Earlier, another brutal murder, this time in Colombo, had caused widespread concern not only among Human Rights activists and the media world, but among an already paralysed public recovering from the savagery of the previous year. On the 23rd February, one of Sri Lanka's best known media personalities, Richard de Zoysa, was dragged out of his home by armed gunmen, and on the next day his body was found with two bullet wounds, washed ashore near a beach south of Colombo. Born of mixed parentage from two well-known families, the de Zoysas and the Saravanamuttus the 36-year old Richard de Zoysa was editor of the Rome-based Inter Press Service (IPS), besides being a talented stage actor. Pro-government vigilante groups responsible for much of the terror the previous year were believed to be behind the murder.

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The war meanwhile had intensified, taking a toll of an estimated three thousand lives during the first month itself. In Jaffna, the 18th century Dutch fort on the edge of the lagoon which served as an army garrison, was under siege by hundreds of Tigers softening it with mortars. The Sri Lankan air force was hard put to evacuate the 250-strong army garrison holed up inside the fort, and running short of food and water. Instead, the planes kept bombarding the town practically every day, without aim or reason. On June 30, a Sia Marchetti plane dived low over St.Marys Cathedral and dropped a bomb on the grounds, damaging part of the roof, shattering the glass dome on top and the windows of residential quarters several yards away. Buildings around the fort were already razed to the ground. In the town people used to dive for cover into hurriedly dug air shelters as the bombers descend. So familiar they were with the daily air raids, adults and children could even distinguish an Avro, Sia Marchetti, Y-8 or Y-12 by the sound each makes. It was the helicopter gunships –"helis" as they were known that they really feared.

Living as they did between life and death, the Jaffna man had learnt to survive. Air raids apart, they had to put up with lack of electricity, shortage of food, fuel and medicine and other basic necessities. The Jaffna hospital was closed, because it was in the line of fire both from the LTTE and the army within the fort. Kilinochchi in the mainland had become a ghost town, and people began fleeing from there by the thousands to Vavuniya and onwards to Mannar. The refugee exodus from Mannar to Rameswaram in India went unabated. The daily flow of boat people into India averaged 1,000 to 3,000. By end of August, the Sri Lankan refugee population in Tamil Nadu had crossed the one lakh mark. Several prominent human rights activists met in Delhi and urged the Indian government not to be "passive spectator" to the "genocide" in Sri Lanka. On August 27, Indian Prime Minister V.P.Singh expressed deep concern at the sharp escalation of conflict in Sri Lanka and appealed for an immediate end to hostilities and return to negotiations.

The following month saw the Sri Lankan military abandoning the Jaffna

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fort, amidst continuous heavy fire from the LTTE. A Sia Marchetti bomber plane was brought down by Tiger fire , but the government claimed it was due to a technical fault. The Fort was a dangerous entry point into Jaffna town, and the hurried evacuation of the troops on the 26th September was a morale booster for the Tigers. In London, Kittu told *The Hindu* correspondent – "We have hoisted the Tiger flag on the fort".

**There was an amazing story behind the planting of the Tiger flag. Just before undertaking his fast in 1987, Thileepan had addressed a public meeting at the esplanade adjoining the Fort. In the course of his speech, he pointed his finger at the Fort and said – *"This has always remained as a symbol of the enslavement of the Tamil people, from the time of the Dutch and until now. We cannot liberate our people until our flag of freedom flies on this fort*". At the time of the siege, Thileepan's third death anniversary was being commemorated in Jaffna, and on September 15, the day he began his fast in 1987, leaflets were being distributed exhorting the people to observe a 11-day mourning in his memory. The leaflet concluded with the assurance that the LTTE would keep Thileepan's pledge and plant its flag on the Fort on the day he breathed his last. And on the 26th September morning, the day Thileepan died, the Tigers did plant the flag on the Fort, and at the exact time Thileepan had breathed his last – 10.48 a.m. !!** It speaks volumes for the tenacity of the Tiger will that while engaged in a military operation pounding the Fort for three long months, they were at the same time keeping their mind focussed on a deadline to capture the Fort, so as to enable them to keep a pledge!

The annual "Martyrs Week" in November was to see a major military triumph for the LTTE, when they overran the Mankulam army camp on November 24. More than 250 soldiers were feared killed, although later estimates said that casualties were less, because a large number had fled to safety to Vavuniya and beyond. More than 1,500 militants armed with AK-47 rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and improvised mortars (the deadly Pasilon-

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2000) had reportedly stormed the camp at 3 a.m. and engaged the soldiers for more than 36 hours before capturing the camp. It was the worst military and political debacle for the government since the war began. Mankulam was also the second army camp to fall to the LTTE, the earlier one being the smaller one at Kokkavil where again more than 50 soldiers were killed. With the fall of Mankulam, there was no Sri Lankan army presence on the 100-kilometre stretch between Vavuniya in the south and Elephant Pass in the north.

The fall of Mankulam rattled the government for more than one reason. Apart from loss of face and loss of territory, what astonished the Government was the speed with which the LTTE, despite periodic heavy losses of cadres, metamorphosed into a conventional army. Military analysts were also impressed by the ingenious way the Tigers improvised weapons and vehicles which proved more deadly than the sophisticated imported armour used by government troops. The Tigers' special mortar, the Pasilon-2000, and a deadly-looking improvised armoured vehicle which according to a Sri Lankan officer who escaped from the Jaffna fort, "***looked like nothing on earth***" were quoted as examples.

In a bid to beef up its troops after the Mankulam debacle, the Government began to enlist cadres from militant groups opposed to the LTTE. The EPDP under Devananda was already working in alliance with the Sri Lankan forces with arms supplied by the government. PLOTE cadres who served as mercenaries in the Maldivian coup attempt were now being wooed to work as mercenaries for the Sri Lanka government. Others who were in refugee camps in Tamil Nadu were also expected to enlist. A PLOTE camp was set up in Rambakulam in Vavuniya, while TELO cadres were hoping to assist the army in Batticaloa if they were supplied with weapons. **The Tamil Eelam liberation movements which produced thousands of heroes and martyrs were never short of collaborators either! It was hard to imagine these groups with "Tamil Eelam" as part of their names working as mercenaries for the Sri Lanka government**! The EPRLF however

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which had its frictions with the Premadasa government chose to pursue an independent path.

In a surprise move on December 30, the LTTE declared a unilateral ceasefire effective from midnight of the 31st. The message was sent to the government through the ICRC representative. The LTTE's move was prompted by their desire to give relief to the people who had been subjected to the genocidal attacks by the government, according to LTTE sources. If the government failed to reciprocate, the LTTE will continue "defensive armed action" reports said. The government in turn responded to the offer cautiously stating that time was needed to assess the "genuineness" of the LTTE intentions. The ebullient, tough-talking Ranjan Wijeratne , as was to be expected, said there was no question of a ceasefire until the Tigers laid down their arms. " They start wars whenever they feel like it, and then say we must stop whenever they want us to stop", he said. Despite that rhetoric, the guns fell silent on both sides as the year ended.

While events were taking their own course in Sri Lanka, the Indian political scene was going through a state of flux. The V.P.Singh government was a conglomerate of parties with conflicting interests and with parties jostling for power, its end came in November. The new man at the helm was Chandra Shekhar, who was installed in power with the help of Rajiv Gandhi's Congress-I. Within a few days of his swearing-in on November 10, a sudden controversy broke out about alleged Tiger presence in Tamil Nadu. In the centre of the storm was Chief Minister Karunanidhi. With Congress-I pulling the strings and with Jayalalitha of the AIADMK also sniping away at the DMK for her own ends, it was getting pretty clear that there was a conspiracy to unseat Karunanidhi and bring in President's rule in Tamil Nadu. In a bid to head off that impending threat Karunanidhi himself did a foolish thing. Trying to prove to the Centre that he was flushing out suspect militants he rounded up over 450 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, a majority of whom were students enrolled in various educational institutions and continuing their studies in Tamil Nadu. For good measure, he also ordered the arrests of 78-

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year old attorney-at-law, R.Namasivayam, 58-year old M.K.Eelaventhan, both well-known in Tamil Nadu, and a few other elders . Although they were released the same day, police were posted outside their residences. Eventually, Karunanidhi got the sack anyway.

*Tailpiece:* An interesting development at that time was the publication of the memoirs of ex-Mossad agent Victor Ostrovsky. Few books on intelligence caused as much of an uproar as his book, *By Way of Deception.* The Israelis tried hard to get the book banned, but failed. One of Ostrovsky's allegations was that Mossad trained Sri Lankan troops, Tamil Tigers and Indian security forces – all at the same time! Some excerpts:

> I'll meet you at the airport", Amy said, because we have a group of people coming from Sri Lanka to train here". Amy was waiting for the Sri Lankans' flight from London when I joined him. "When these guys arrive", he said, "don't make a face". "What do you mean?" I asked. "Well, these guys are monkeylike. They come from a place that's not developed. They're not long out of the trees. So don't expect much". Amy and I escorted the nine Sri Lankans through a back door of the airport into an air-conditioned van. These were the first arrivals from a group that would finally total nearly 50. They would then be divided into three smaller groups....
>
> A purchasing team (from Sri Lanka) also arrived to buy weapons on a larger scale. They bought seven or eight large PT boats, called Devora, which they would use mainly to patrol their northern shores against Tamils. A group of high-ranking officers who wanted to purchase radar and other naval equipment to counter the Tamils who were still getting through from India and mining Sri Lankan waters....
>
> I was to squire Penny, President Jayewardene's daughter-in-law, around to the usual tourist spots for two days. Penny

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was a pleasant woman, physically an Indian version of Corazon Aquino. She was a Buddhist because her husband was a Buddhist, but she was somehow still a Christian, so she wanted to see all the Christian holy places....

The Tamils were training at the commando naval base, learning penetration techniques, mining landings, communications, and how to sabotage ships similar to the Devora. There were about 28 men in each group, so it was decided that Yosy should take the Tamils to Haifa that night while I took the Sinhalese to Tel Aviv, thus avoiding any chance encounters .After their basic training routine at Kfar Sirkin, the Sinhalese were taken to the naval base to be taught essentially how to deal with all the techniques the Israelis had just taught the Tamils. It was pretty hectic.

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# Chapter 26

## 1991-1997: The Rajiv Gandhi Assassination & a "Judicial Assassination".

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# 1991-1997: The Rajiv Gandhi Assassination & a "Judicial Assassination".

1991 would be remembered as the year in which the course of Sri Lankan and Indian politics got hopelessly intertwined with each other because of one shocking incident – the Rajiv Gandhi assassination. The year itself began as a harbinger of another decade of violence, war, violations of human rights, political greed and assassinations. In Sri Lanka, President Premadasa, under pressure from the army, dithered in accepting the LTTE's olive branch of a ceasefire and resorted to massive aerial bombing in the north; in India, the knives were out for Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi. On January 30, the DMK government was dismissed under Article 356 of the constitution and President's rule was imposed. In its editorial comment the next day, *The Hindu* called it *"an outrage that has few parallels in the working of the Constitution"*, and, *"in this debasement of democracy, the AIADMK and Congress-I found a more than willing tool in the Chandra Shekhar government"*.

In Colombo, Premadasa survived a near-mutiny by the Army. While his government announced a 7-day suspension of offensive operations beginning 3rd January, the armed forces began a series of armed provocations in the north-east in defiance of government policy, thus effectively torpedoing the Government announcement. It was known that some leading members of the Buddhist clergy were in league with the top brass of the army. In a move that was obviously intended to cut the ground under the President's

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feet, the army's northern commander Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa had a secret rendezvous with two leading prelates, the head of the Malwatte Chapter, Ven.Palipane Chandananda and the high-profile Ven.Rambukwelle Sobhita at Tantrimalai on the 8th. The news of the meeting was later leaked out to a trusted newspaper correspondent who acted as an unofficial spokesman of the armed forces.

The Air Force meanwhile, strengthened by additional acquisitions of four Sia Marchetti attack planes, three American –built Bell 212 helicopters, and five fixed wing transport aircraft intensified its air attacks on civilian areas. The areas most affected were Valvettiturai, the northern coastal town and birthplace of Pirabakaran, and areas such as Kokuvil and Kondavil, closer to Jaffna town. Temples, churches, and schools were targeted by a variety of crude bombs. When reporters in Colombo questioned the irascible Minister of State for Defence Ranjan Wijeratne on the aerial bombing of civilian targets, his reply was typical of the man - "They must move out and vacate the peninsula if they want to live", he said, referring to the one million people there. "We can't fight a war the way you want us to fight. They must use their common sense. If they are stubborn and support the LTTE, good luck to them....You want us to extend the war for the next ten years, saying civilians, civilians. I am not prepared to fight a war for ten years...My time frame is my time frame".

That was Ranjan Wijeratne in February 1991. On March 2, the most audacious bomb blast that Colombo had seen until then, took away the life of the high-sounding Minister. A deafening explosion saw the Mercedes Benz car in which he was travelling with three escorts blown into smithereens. Two escort jeeps, one back-up vehicle and two buses were wrecked. More than 30 others were killed, including security men, police commandos and several passers-by. Over 100 others were wounded, many of them hospitalised. The blast was caused by explosives weighing between 60 to 100 kg, packed into a vehicle and detonated by remote control, presumably by someone within visual range. Suddenly, the war had come to the heart of Colombo.

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Two days before his death, on Thursday February 28, the Minister held his weekly Press conference, which turned out to be his last. He was asked about an Indian proposal for the creation of an Interim Council for the North-East. "It is not necessary that we form such a Council", he said. "It would expose the other Tamil leaders to the wrath of the LTTE".

**Q:** But the Tamil political leaders are agreeable to form an Interim Council.

**A:** No, it is against their security.

**Q:** They seem to be eager to risk their lives?

**A:** Although they are eager to go to the next world, I am not prepared to let them go.

If what happened to Ranjan Wijeratne in Colombo was shocking enough, that paled into insignificance beside what shook India, and the world, on the night of May 21. The Rajiv Gandhi assassination came, as an Indian journal described it, "a crime of unimaginable brutality, enormity, dare-devilry and cool expertise in execution". *(The assassination was to change this writer's life as well. Why should an Indian leader's assassination change this poor scribe's life? But it did. That story, my story, will follow in the next chapter).*

The grisly assassination took place in a somnolent little town called Sriperumbudur, about 40 kilometres from Madras. Rajiv was to address a Congress-I election meeting, to support the candidature of Maragatham Chandrasekhar, a woman who rose to some political prominence from a Scheduled Caste background. There were questions raised earlier, of the need for the Sriperumbudur meeting on a site concerning which security officials expressed their objections. As to who insisted on such a site, and why, was never known.

Here was a man, once the Prime Minister, and in all probability to become

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Prime Minister again, and now destined to have his life snuffed out in such shocking circumstances. Grief apart, and more than grief, it was a deep anger that shook the nation. But unfortunately, amidst media hysteria, the anger was turned on the LTTE even before any evidence of LTTE complicity in the crime was found. AIADMK leader Jayalalitha went further. "I appeal, rather demand, that the Centre should take immediate action to see that all Sri Lankan Tamils are sent back, which should take place immediately", she said.

When investigators began work on the killing, they had no idea as to how the assassination happened. Seventeen persons who were close to the scene including several policemen who would have witnessed the crime, had themselves died along with Rajiv Gandhi. It was really an inanimate witness, a camera, surprisingly with a film intact, that was found at the scene of the blast that gave them various leads. Even the man who photographed the scene with that borrowed camera, a 22-year old freelance photographer Haribabu was dead, killed by the blast. A member of the Special Investigating Team (SIT) was quoted as saying ,

> When Mahatma Gandhi was murdered, we had Nathuram Godse. When Mrs. Gandhi was killed by her bodyguards, we had Satwant Singh. What do we have after Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated? Only one photograph and a disfigured head" (*SUNDAY* magazine, Calcutta, 16-22 June 1991)

Among the ten shots in the film was that vital one - showing a heavily made-up spectacled woman dressed in *salwar-kameez*, (later identified as "Dhanu", the Sri Lankan Tamil belt-bomb suicide killer) with a shoulder bag, holding a sandalwood garland. She was standing between Latha Kannan a Congress-I worker and her 15-year old daughter Kokila who was to recite a Hindi poem in praise of Rajiv Gandhi. Standing slightly away from them was a man dressed in flowing *pyjama kurta* with a notebook in hand, later identified as the "one-eyed" Sivarasan. Another shot showed Nalini (Indian)

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and "Subha" (Sri Lankan) two of the subsequent accused, dressed in silk sarees, seated together at the back of the women's section of the audience. A third shot showed Kokila being patted on the shoulder by Mr.Gandhi, and standing right behind was "Dhanu" with flowers on her hair, her back turned to the camera, but minus the bag on her right shoulder. It was later explained that "Dhanu" had entrusted the bag to Latha before the act of garlanding. There was however one notable omission among the publicised photographs, the one that should have shown "Dhanu" garlanding Mr.Gandhi. According to the theory, it was in the act of approaching Mr.Gandhi with the garland that "Dhanu" detonated the bomb. If she had to bend low for the purpose of detonating the bomb, as was assumed, she would have done so **after** garlanding Mr.Gandhi, but there was no photograph that showed either.

According to the reconstruction theory of the experts, the suicide killer had worn a 8 cm wide, 65 cm long belt with steel ribs, with three of the ribs removed and stuffed with explosives. The explosive used was similar to that used by military authorities known as RDX (Cyclo-trimethylene-trinitramine). Professor Chandrasekharan, Director of the Tamil Nadu Forensic Sciences Department told the Press that in his 30-year experience in forensic science he had not come across such precision work. "This is the first time I am seeing a belt bomb although we have seen letter and transistor bombs used by militants in India and elsewhere. The finesse with which the explosive was stitched into the denim belt **proves the involvement of professionals"**

Did a Hollywood thriller movie titled *Delta Force* inspire whoever designed "Dhanu's" belt bomb? In that film there was a sequence where a young girl straps an explosive device of the belt bomb on her torso before wearing her dress. She than goes to a public function, and walks towards the dais with a bouquet for the VIP. Getting close to him, she activates the belt bomb and blows up herself and the VIP, a scene that had a striking similarity to what happened at Sriperumbudur. Justice Verma who was asked to probe into security lapses over the assassination had enquired from the investigators

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and the Intelligence Bureau whether or not the movie *Delta Force* had been released before the assassination. They had reportedly said that *Delta Force* video cassettes were released in India only in August 1991. The movie itself was made in 1990, and video cassettes of the film were however available in western countries in the first quarter of 1991. If it was that movie that had suggested the mode of assassination, did it then indicate that there was a foreign hand involved in the assassination? *( Ramesh Dalal, Rajiv Gandhi's Assassination: The Mystery Unfolds. UBS Publishers' Distributors Ltd. 5, Ansari Road, New Delhi-110 002, 2001)*

The Central Bureau of Investigations (CBI) lost no time in setting up a high-powered team to probe the murder. Selected to head the Special Investigating Team (SIT) was D.R.Karthikeyan, one-time DIG (Intelligence) in Karnataka. Assisting him were Amod Kanth from Delhi and Amit Verma of Tamil Nadu. Within a few days of setting to work, the SIT investigators let it be known that the ***"needle of suspicion***" for the murder pointed very strongly at the LTTE. This led to days and weeks of hysteria from Congress-I and AIADMK workers and from the media, against not only the LTTE but against Sri Lankan Tamil refugees living in Tamil Nadu. But unlike in the Indira Gandhi post-assassination period when mobs inspired by Congress-I leaders ran amok in Delhi and killed hundreds of Sikhs to avenge one Sikh assassin, not one Sri Lankan Tamil was touched. The hostility towards them came not from fellow Tamils from Tamil Nadu, but only from sections of the media and from official quarters.

Two and a half months before the assassination, Kasi Ananthan, known as the "Poet Laurete of Thamil Eelam" had a meeting with Rajiv Gandhi in Delhi. The meeting was arranged through an editorial intermediary from *The Hindu.* T.S.Subramaniam writing in the *Frontline* of June 8-21, 1991, giving details of what transpired at the March 5 meeting said it lasted about 30 minutes and went off very well. Rajiv Gandhi had even asked Kasi Ananthan to convey his greetings to Pirabakaran and the latter was pleased with the renewal of friendly contact with the former Prime Minister. It was stated

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on behalf of the LTTE that conscious as they were of the fact that Rajiv Gandhi could return to power, they wanted to mend fences with him. They wanted to put the bitterness of the IPKF war behind them. Ten days later, on March 15, London-based international banker Arjuna Sittampalam had himself met with Rajiv Gandhi on behalf of the expatriate Tamils and had a cordial meeting. LTTE leader Kittu, then in London, interviewed by *The Hindu* had cited these meetings and denied that the LTTE had any hand in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. Another LTTE leader Yogaratnam Yogi felt that the LTTE was being blamed because there would be a domestic backlash if anyone else was involved. (Subsequently, in August, Kittu was asked to leave Britain, with threat of possible detention and expulsion to Sri Lanka)

Two weeks after the assassination what was the state of play? Investigators were breaking their heads over the plethora of ever multiplying "leads", but there was no break-through yet. Leaflets containing pictures of the belt bomb woman were strewn from the air all over the northeast of Sri Lanka. A CBI team rushed to Colombo ended in a wild goose chase, with anti-LTTE Tamil militant groups assigning different identities to the woman bomber. Eager to pin the blame on the LTTE, one group said she was "Sumathi". Another said she was "Malathi". A third said she was "Akileswari". In the process, someone had tried to pin the identity of the suicide bomber on a young woman who was a Chemistry teacher in a school in Colombo, all because she had once studied at Madras Christian College! Meanwhile in India, Doordashan and the print media carried pictures of the mysterious man in *kurta,* calling him the "one-eyed Jack". Telephone calls from excited members of the public poured into the CBI offices claiming he was seen in various places in Madras at the same time!

Moses Manoharan, the Reuters man in Delhi said in a despatch to the *Asahi Evening News,* Japan, of June 8, quoting this writer,

> The killing of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi is still a mystery with investigators struggling for clues to

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> the assassin's identity and motive "Everyone has become a Sherlock Holmes with their own theory about the death", said Subramaniam Sivanayagam, Editor of the *Tamil Nation* newspaper published by Sri Lankan Tamils....he said there was no reason for the LTTE to alienate a country from which it drew considerable support....

The Reuters report also quoted Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar as saying several times that the Tigers were definitely to blame, and that the question remaining was whether they were acting as agents to someone else. (He was replaced as Prime Prime Minister by Narasimha Rao who took his oaths on June 21). Tamil Nadu police chief K.Mohandas said that there were many question marks. ***"In a whodunit WHY is the first important aspect. HOW and WHO come afterward",*** he said. In his view the three-month government deadline for a report on the assassination might put undue pressure on investigators and tempt them to make evidence to fit the theory. "I know the psychology of police in this country", he said, "if you set time limits, the police will come up with an accused".

Mohandas was not alone in thinking there were many question marks about the assassination. The first of the many question marks relates to the fixing of the Sriperumbudur meeting and the choice of the site. Firstly, the Sriperumbudur meeting was not in the schedule in Mr.Gandhi's visit. It was stated to be the idea of somebody in Delhi. Secondly, the choice of the venue for the meeting – an open dry tank bed surrounded by bushes, but yet close enough to the highway for anyone to make an easy getaway, hardly a suitable place for a VVIP to visit at night. Who arranged that venue? Tamil Nadu Congress chief Vazhapadi Ramamurthy had said he was opposed to the venue. Congress-I leader Moopanar said he knew nothing about the plan for the Sriperambudur meeting. Surprisingly, neither of the local Congress-I leaders Ramamurthy or Moopanar were at the meeting to receive Mr.Gandhi. The candidate herself Maragatham Chandrasekhar said it was the Delhi party people who arranged the meeting at that place! That itself was curious. Did

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the killers have a mole in the Congress-I? Mr.Gandhi's tour schedule was upset when his plane developed engine trouble at Visakapatnam delaying his visit to Sriperambudur by two hours. It was 10.15 p.m. when he arrived at the site. Was somebody at his trail all the way? One year later, when Home Minister Chavan visited the site of the meeting, the first question he asked was – Who fixed this venue for the meeting? That mystery was never solved.

There were other deeper implications. The name of the powerful "Godman" Chandraswamy who was thought to have several international links, recurred time and again in allegations about a wider conspiracy in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination. Chandraswamy was stated to be a man wielding enormous influence in Delhi political circles. The talk went that he was the "political guru" of Narasimha Rao, under whose tenure as Prime Minister the Rajiv Gandhi assassination probe began.. He was also alleged to be an associate of the international arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi. At the same time RAW had linked Khashogghi's name with that of "KP", the elusive arms procurer for the LTTE. Ramesh Dalal, a Trade Union leader, in his book – *Rajiv Gandhi's Assassination: The Mystery Unfolds* says he made representations to the Home Ministry with the specific allegation that Chandraswamy was involved in a wider conspiracy behind the murder of Rajiv, but no action was taken. *(pp. 59, 62)*. Later, several witnesses testified against him in the Jain Commission of Inquiry accusing him of the same charge.

It was publicly admitted that PLO leader Yasser Arafat had earlier warned the Prime Minister of that time, Chandrasekhar that there was a murder conspiracy against Rajiv Gandhi. That certainly pointed to international ramifications. What made Chandrasekhar ignore that warning? Why didn't the investigators want to probe the international connections in the murder conspiracy? The Law Minister at that time was none other than Dr. Subramaniam Swamy. What was his role in the entire affair? It appears that he had written a book titled – *The Assassination of Rajiv Gandhi,* claiming that the LTTE alone had master-minded the murder. It was alleged by Ramesh

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Dalal that it was an attempt to throw the scent away from Chandraswami and his links with CIA and Mossad. There was no attempt by the investigators to identify the source of the explosives used in fabricating the belt bomb. Was it because that could compel them to look beyond the LTTE for involvement in the assassination? There was a curious incident involving one of the investigators, a DIG called Srikumar, who had gone to London for the purpose of probing the wider conspiracy. His briefcase containing some sensitive documents was reported stolen and he had returned empty handed.

While the CBI proceeded with the murder investigations, two one-man commissions were appointed, one by the then Prime Minister Chandrasekhar to probe the security lapses, headed by Justice Verma, and the other by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao to look into the possibility of a larger conspiracy headed by Justice M.C.Jain. With SIT and the two Commissions working at cross-purposes, with politicians at the Centre involved in ego-battles, Justice Jain openly criticised the Government for its non-cooperation. Even after four years of the assassination, the Rao Government was being accused of dragging its feet regarding the probes. Sonia Gandhi herself was reportedly upset. One year later, the SIT chief Karthikeyan, having long decided that the LTTE alone was responsible for the crime, was in no mood to think of larger conspiracies involving international agencies. *India Today*, which interviewed him (*I.T.May 31, 1996*) found him resentful of any criticism, and commented that he "lost his cool several times while answering questions". Parts of the interview –

> **Q:** Why has the SIT been so cagey about sharing its case diaries with the Jain Commission?
>
> **A:** There is no question of being cagey. The legal position is that the Investigating Agency will report and submit its documents to the designated Court alone. It is a very sensitive case**, an in-camera trial is on** and the accused are being examined....

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**Q:** So you deny the existence of a larger conspiracy involving international Agencies?

**A: What larger conspiracy? No other agency except the LTTE was involved.**

**Q: Why did you write to the then CBI director, asking for deletion of certain case diaries?**

**A: These are an organisation's internal matters and not anybody else'sconcern, least of all, the media's. (emphasis this writer's)**

Within a week of the assassination, the following were arrested on suspicion: **Nalini**, a stenographer in a Madras firm, her mother **Padma,** her brother **Bhagyanathan,** owner of a printing press, and **Murugan** from Jaffna, friend of Nalini. Others the police were looking for were the one-eyed **Sivarasan**, believed to be the mastermind of the operation, **Subha** from Sri Lanka, who was seated with Nalini at the Sriperumbudur meeting and **Muthuraja**, an Indian national who was "believed" to have joined the LTTE. More arrests followed within a month : **Robert Payas**, accused of harbouring Sivarasan; **Jaikumar** accused of sheltering the "assassination squad"; and **Perarivalan** or Arivu, believed to be an important link in the chain. All those arrests were made on suspicions and assumptions. One month after the crime, there was yet **no substantive, concrete evidence** either about the conspiracy or proof of LTTE involvement. Retired Supreme Court Judge V.R.Krishna Iyer writing in the *Frontline* magazine was blunt in his observations:

> Even now, the delay that has occurred is too long to be forgiven…the do's and don't's of detective arts demand strict, prompt compliance if you are not to miss the chase or lose your track….If you take liberties with the law and make up a little or add padding material to paint your version with looks

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> of probability, somewhere it will leak and the case may fail.... Any investigation guided by the Criminal Procedure Code has to obey certain disciplines....Indian justice is not interested in producing a theory or story that propitiates the powers that be . *(Frontline, June 22- July 5)*

A full year after the crime, the SIT team was reported to be ready with a charge sheet to be filed before a special designated court of S.M.Siddiqi in Madras. According to the charge sheet, LTTE leader V.Pirabakaran had planned to eliminate Mr.Gandhi as early as 1986! (*India Today*, May 31, 1992) It was alleged that the Intelligence Bureau had taped a telephone conversation between Pirabakaran and Anton Balasingham in which Pirabakaran made an angry outburst against Rajiv Gandhi, saying he should be "fixed" once he gets out of Indian soil. "Pottu Amman", LTTE's Intelligence chief was also named as another main accused. As to how those two could be brought to trial by seeking extradition from the Sri Lanka government was a problem that SIT expected the Indian government to handle. Although the identity of "Dhanu" was finally established as a Sri Lankan Tamil, there was no proof that she belonged to the LTTE. Various photographs of women Tigers were scrutinised and one of them was found to have a close resemblance to "Dhanu", and that was found proof enough! As for Sivarasan, whose real name was Packiachandran, it was stated that he had joined TELO in 1983 and had received extensive Indian training "in handling explosives" but following factional rivalry had then joined the LTTE.

In 1993, a specially constructed prison-cum-court was set up in Poonamalee in the outskirts of Madras. The court complex was described as resembling from a distance "a Nazi concentration camp". Barbed wire fences, high walls and armed guards perched on watch towers monitored all entry points (*India Today*, February 28, 1995).The trial was described as "*in camera*" - a euphemism for a secret trial. The accused were tried under a vindictive piece of legislation called the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA). That itself militated against a fair trial. Unlike under the accepted

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judicial procedure, where an accused is *presumed innocent unless proved guilty*, this Act places the burden of proof of innocence on to the accused. Once a person is arrested under this Act, arbitrarily or otherwise, it becomes his responsibility to prove that he is *not guilty.*

The SIT charge sheeted 41 accused. Of these, Pirabakaran, Pottu Amman, and Akila, the "deputy chief of the Women Tigers Intelligence" were termed as "absconding". Under Indian law there was no provision for trial *in absentia,* and therefore they could not be tried. Of the remaining 38, twelve of them were stated to have died, mostly by their own hands. There was no explanation why Sivarasan did not swallow a cyanide capsule, as was to be expected Instead, he shot himself to death, when surrounded by SIT officials in a house in Bangalore. Subha also died with him. Shanmugam, an Indian national and smuggler who operated from Kodikkarai who was in custody was alleged to have escaped. He was later found hanging on a tree branch with his feet touching the ground. There was strong suspicion that he was killed in custody, but an official inquiry ruled it out.

At the end of it, 26 persons, including five women, found themselves charged with conspiracy to murder. There were 251 charges against them, including the citing of the Passports Act, the Foreigners' Act and the Explosive Substances Act. Thirteen of the accused were Indian nationals, and the other thirteen Sri Lankan Tamils. Some of them were alleged to have been tortured and confessions forced out of them. The oldest among them was Kanagasabapathy, who was 72 when he was arrested, and the youngest was Atharai (Chandralekha) who was 17. Being under 18, she was a minor in the eyes of Indian law, and she should have been tried in a Juvenile Court. But the Special Court disregarded this.

The SIT had originally cited 1,044 witnesses, but by May 1997, only 288 of them were examined, all of them prosecution witnesses. No defence witnesses were produced. The identity of the prosecution witnesses were not revealed to the accused, nor were the defending lawyers given their

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names in advance. Video recordings of speeches made by LTTE supporters criticising Rajiv Gandhi and the IPKF for causing civilian killings were produced as showing LTTE's antipathy towards Rajiv Gandhi, and hence as proof of LTTE's intention to kill him. Regular coded wireless intercepts of conversations between Sivarasan and Pottu Amman were admitted by court as evidence .

Six and a half years after the assassination, on January 28, 1998, a judge of the special court V. Navaneetham, sitting behind closed doors, read out his judgement. Journalists were barred from the court room and were accommodated outside in a specially erected marquee along with relatives of the accused. At 5.45 p.m. the judge pronounced sentence - ALL 26 ACCUSED TO HANG! Even Nalini who had given birth to a child in prison (she was earlier married to accused Murugan) was not shown clemency. Judge Navaneetham said in his judgement – *"giving deterrent punishment alone can deter other potential offenders and in future dissuade our people from associating with any terrorist organisation to do such diabolical and heinous crimes".* It was the SIT chief Karthikeyan who came out and announced the verdict to the waiting throng of people. He looked jubilant. He then read out from a piece of paper – "*Satyameva Jayate. The truth will always prevail. All the 26 accused sentenced to death."* It was a case of the prosecutor announcing the judgement!

It was an unprecedented sentence. Never before in India - and rarely in the world – had so many people sentenced to death for a single crime. "To keep one family (the Gandhis) they are convicting 26 other families", said an angry, weeping Atputham Ammal, a school teacher and mother of one of the accused Perarivalan. That's not far off the mark, said noted lawyer and former Union law minister Ram Jethmalani. He believed the judge went overboard. All the 26 people, he said, couldn't have been equally wrong or sinful.

"I felt very bad and sad about the judgement", said defence counsel,

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S.Doraiswamy. "It is erroneous and incorrect. There was no evidence led to prove that any of the 26 accused had in his or her individual capacity knowledge of the conspiracy to murder Mr.Gandhi. We will appeal in the Supreme Court within a week". Although all except four were freed by the Supreme Court and none of them was hanged, Judge Navaneetham's verdict will remain a permanent blot on the country's judiciary. It was, as was said at that time a case of JUDICIAL ASSASSINATION !

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# Chapter 27

## 1990–1993: Adventure in Journalism II : The *Tamil Nation* and Jail life!

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# 1990-1993: Adventure in Journalism II : The *Tamil Nation* and Jail life!

On September 1, 1990, one hundred invitees gathered at a hotel in Madras for tea and snacks and for a more important purpose. A new English fortnightly named *Tamil Nation* was being launched. It was a mixed gathering of Indian newsmen, Indian sympathisers of the Eelam Tamil cause and prominent Eelam Tamils living in the city.

(There was one uninvited guest found hovering outside the door who turned out to be a policeman in civvies from the "Q" branch. The "Q" branch originally created to keep a watch on Naxalites was entrusted after 1983 to switch their surveillance to Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. He was also invited in, there being nothing to hide)

The *Tamil Nation* was the brain child of a few London-based professionals – four doctors, two engineers, a teacher, an accountant and a well-known lawyer – all highly committed men who felt the need for a vibrant journal in English to espouse the Tamil cause. Towards that purpose they set up the Tamil Forum Ltd. with its registered address at Croydon, Surrey. Tamil efforts at English-language journalism had somehow a sad side to it all the time.

The *Tamil Voice International,* the London-based pro-LTTE fortnightly journal, run by N.Seevaratnam on behalf of Tamil International Ltd. filled the need of a strong voice for the Tamils admirably. This writer himself, apart

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from providing editorial assistance from India, was a regular contributor for that journal, mostly under the pen name *Kurushetran.* But in May 1990, that journal was forced to close down under unfortunate circumstances.

The monthly *Tamil Times* founded in October 1981 by that ***eminence grise*** of the Tamil expatriate community in the UK, C.J.T.Thamotheram, changed hands midway and subsequently changed direction as well. Although it continued to be published uninterruptedly for more than two decades – the only journal run by Tamils to have enjoyed such a durable existence – it was thought to be, by a wide spectrum of Tamil expatriates, no longer capable of speaking up for an oppressed Tamil nation with any conviction or courage.

The Jaffna-based *Saturday Review* which began publication in January 1982 with this writer as founder-editor, first banned by the Jayewardene government in July 1983, continued publication after 1984 with Gamini Navaratne as Editor. But with the Indian army's entry into Jaffna, it too was shut down. Around the same time in 1987, the Tamil Information Centres in London, Madras and Madurai were wound up following the Rajiv Gandhi – Jayewardene Agreement. It was under these circumstances that a serious lacuna in getting the Tamil voice heard was felt, and the idea of a *Tamil Nation* was born. The paper, a fortnightly of 12 pages was to be published by London Forum Ltd. and funded by them. The arrangement was for me to edit it and print it in India, and the copies airlifted back to London for circulation from there. The paper was priced at 60 pence.

The Rajiv Gandhi assassination took place on May 21, 1991, and I brought out three issues of the paper after that, dated June 1, June 15 and July 1-15. Around mid-July, a strange thing happened. My brother-in-law in Colombo had rung my wife anxiously and wanted to know what had happened to me. My wife was puzzled and assured him that nothing had happened. He said there was a news item in a Colombo newspaper, *The Island,* to say that the Central Bureau of Investigations (CBI) in charge of the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case had raided the office of *Tamil Nation.* On phoning him

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later I found that the report was datelined Reuters, Madras. I knew the journalist who was at that time working for Reuters in Madras, a man who had been to see me several times. Surprised and angry that he chose to send such a false report, I phoned the Reuters chief in Delhi, Moses Manoharan and complained to him. He said he would enquire into the matter.

A day or two later, I had a caller at my flat, which also served as the "office" of *Tamil Nation.* He introduced himself as Narayanan, a Superintendent of Police from the CBI, (!) and said that he had been asked to go over my flat. He was quite polite about it, and I invited him in, and showed him into the master room of the flat from where I used to work. He spent considerable time going through my bookcase, records regarding the paper and other documents including my passport. On leaving, he said his superiors at "Malligai" would like to see me, and whether he could send a vehicle for me next morning. "Malligai" was a stately building at Greenways Road, Adyar, and it served as the nerve centre of the investigations into the Rajiv Gandhi assassination. I told him there was no need for a vehicle and that I would call there myself. Now who had tipped off the Reuters man about a "CBI raid" even before it happened?

At Malligai, I was asked to meet two officers whose names were not given. They asked me about the paper, my own antecedents, offered me a packeted lunch, and on leaving told me that another superior officer would like to see me the following day. He turned out to be one of the two DIGs of the CBI, Amodh Kanth from Delhi. He shook hands with me, and said that he had been briefed about me. Could I give him some background information about the LTTE, the origins of the movement and whatever else I could tell him that could help in the investigation? The next one hour, I was virtually giving him a history lesson on political developments in Sri Lanka, and how the LTTE came to resort to an armed struggle. He thanked me and again shook hands with me. Getting back, I sighed with relief that whatever I feared had ended on that friendly note. How was I to know that some conspiracy at the Tamil Nadu level was being hatched against me at that very time?

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On the night of July 19, around 10 p.m., several police personnel, not all in uniform, in a jeep and two cars walked in and said they had been asked to search my flat. Accompanying them was the DIG, "Q" branch, whose name escapes my memory, whom I had known. The police went about ransacking the flat, questioning my wife and two daughters, and asked where I kept my money. I showed them a Bond case in which I kept the *Tamil Nation* monies and documents related to expenditure. They said their superiors wanted to question me and took possession of the Bond case which contained monies required for the weekly payments. On my wife asking them why I was required at that time of the night and whether I would be brought back, one man said in Tamil: "Ammah, we are also Tamils". One did not know what he implied by that. The gentleman from the "Q" branch was seated on the sofa all the time, saying nothing. When we were about to leave, I gestured to him as if asking what was really happening, he gestured back as if he had nothing to do with it. Since there was no mention of an arrest, because that would have meant an arrest warrant, I fondly believed that the situation could not be that bad anyway. Only later I was to realise that in Tamil Nadu, niceties like arrest warrants or legal proprieties, human rights or even adherence to the very laws of the country were of supreme unconcern. It was very evident that the State government under Jayalalitha was motivated by sheer vindictiveness against all Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. Anger at the LTTE was being transferred to every Tamil refugee.

In a state where more than 60 percent of the population lived under the poverty line and where the Brahmins who constituted less than 5 percent of the population controlled the media, the banking sector and the government, one could not expect anything better. What does one, after all, make of the Dravida movement that began life with an anti-Brahmin agenda ending up producing a Brahmin woman from Karnataka as leader of a Dravida party and Chief Minister of the State!– before whom grovelling Ministers fell unashamedly at her feet.!!

What happened to me and my two assistants, Kugathasan and

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Anandamurugan, was something on the lines of what happened to the character Joseph K in Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial*. We were deposited at the Inspector's room at the Mylapore police station. There was no inspector, of course not at that time of the night. There were a few characters around whom I assumed were constables in casual clothes. They did not seem to know anything. We spent the night in three chairs, occasionally dozing off. That was no time for conversation. Life in Madras begins only at 10 a.m. so we expected some "action" at that time next morning. But nothing happened. Around 12 noon two men in uniform came as if to make sure we were there, but gave evasive answers to whatever I asked them. My wife who had earlier enquired at our neighbourhood police station at Shastri Nagar was told that my whereabouts were not known. In the evening however, we were taken to the Shastri Nagar police station and again kept there the whole night.

Next morning, I told the Inspector there, a man called Kaliyamurthy that he was breaking his own country's law by detaining us for more than 24 hours. He must either charge us or take us before a magistrate. He spread his hands and quoted a Tamil proverb to the effect – *"Why blame the arrow when those who aimed it were elsewhere*". At about 11 a.m. we were bundled into a jeep and taken before a friendly-looking magistrate. The inspector went up to him and whispered something, and the next thing we knew we were taken to the remand jail at Madras. We had excellent company there, a couple of murderers and a rapist or two! The way they welcomed us, they seemed to be a more humane sort than the human beings we had encountered the previous 36 hours. My wife, children and friends did not know where we were and what happened to me.

Having first detained us unlawfully and then having remanded us without charge for four days between 19 July to 23 July, the Jailor at the Central Prison handed to me a charge sheet consisting of nine pages, signed by an official called R.Christodas Gandhi, described as Joint Secretary to the Government of Tamil Nadu. How sad that a man who had the names of both Christ and Gandhi in his name had to lend his signature to a document that was one-

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third fact **and two-thirds fabrication**! The charge sheet was apparently based on what the proverb-quoting Inspector Kaliyamoorthy had said in his averment in Tamil, which showed that the man had a vivid imagination as well. Given as Appendix 1, it says – *Today 19.7.91, acting on information received around 13.45 that a conspiracy to perform unlawful acts in support of the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers was about to be committed at Apartment 4, Sagar Apartments, 5th Avenue, Besant Nagar, and having no time to get a search warrant from a court of law, I got ready with the "grounds of belief" and at 4 p.m. along with my assistant Cader Meerar, and Nadarajan and head constable Subramany, and other constables and two witnesses Sinniah and Santhiappan went to the aforesaid apartment*.....(I could not fathom why he had to falsely advance the time of his "raid" from 10 p.m. to 4 p.m.).

He follows it up by listing whatever discoveries he made in the course of his raid, including me, my wife and two daughters, (*implying possibly that we were the four conspirators!),* Income and Expenditure Accounts, Artwork of Tamil Nation, two video cassettes,..so on and so on, and then he makes the following serious charges – that I had given the false information in the paper that it was ***"printed"*** by the London Tamil Forum Ltd. *(what was said in the paper was it was **published,** not printed)*, that by so cheating the public and "*selling"* the paper *(the paper was never **sold** in India, it was priced at 60 **pence** and only complementary copies sent to a few prominent politicians)*, that by not disclosing the name of the press in which it was printed and thereby with the deliberate intention of cheating the public and officials *(there was no legal necessity because the paper was not registered or sold in India, only **exported** from India),* and by publishing material in the paper that was intended to incite both the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees and the local public to open rebellion!!

What followed was the most barefaced falsehood. He claims that I had "*confessed"* to the effect that I, along with Kugathasan, Ilango Printers and Ananda Murugan had together made a secret plan to make money by falsely saying that London Tamil Forum Ltd. was printing the paper and upon which

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he immediately recorded that confession. *(Very wisely, he did not claim that I had signed that confession).* **He says he arrested me at 5 p.m.!** The charge sheet, while accepting Inspector Kaliyamurthy's satement, *in toto.* contained the following charges –

1. That I came to India in 1983 clandestinely *(True, but nearly a hundred thousand other refugees also came the same way).*

2. That I had received various remittances from London, and credited to my account at Indian Bank, Besant Nagar without Reserve Bank permission *(Practically every Sri Lankan Tamil family living outside the refugee camps – there were thousands of them - was subsisting on monies received from abroad through local banks without seeking Reserve bank permission, and which monies benefited the country as foreign exchange).*

3. That I did not have a valid visa *(no Sri Lankan Tamil refugee had an updated visa because it was the government policy not to update the visa. Only an exit visa is given on departure).*

The charge sheet – very conveniently – failed to mention that I was a registered refugee like everyone else, holding a Sri Lankan Refugees Identity Certificate of the entire family issued under the name of the Collector of Madras giving personal details of the four of us.

Since the Government of India had not signed the International Refugees Convention, 1951 and the Protocols thereto of 1967, the UNHCR could not have even access to refugee camps. This enabled the Government of India to use the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees as a political bargaining lever against the Government of Sri Lanka; in the same way as Mrs.Indira Gandhi used the influx of one million East Pakistani refugees into India to invade East Pakistan and create Bangladesh. Having remanded me, the charge sheet said, dated 24.7.1991 –

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> The State Government is also aware that Mr.Sivanayagam filed bail application before the IX Metropolitan Magistrate, Saidapet, Madras, and the same was adjourned to 24.7.1991 and is now in judicial custody and he will be dealt with in accordance with the normal criminal law. The State Government is however apprehensive that Mr.Sivanayagam will come out on bail in the usual course and if he is so allowed to remain at large, he will further indulge in such illegal activities. **The State Government is satisfied that there is an imminent possibility of Thiru Sivanayagam coming out on bail and hence there is a compelling necessity warranting his detention under the National Security Act"** (*Emphasis, this writer's*).

This then was an open admission by the State Government that all the charges framed against me were bailable offences. To make that as the reason to detain me for one year under the National Security Act – as if poor me was a threat to the security of that vast country – revealed the mind-set of my persecutors. It should be remembered that Madame Jayalalitha was the Chief Minister at that time.

One morning, I was woken up in my cell by a life convict (life convicts dressed in starched white shorts are used as helpers) and asked to take my bag and come out. It happened to all the Sri Lankans, irrespective of whether they were political detenus like me and my two assistants or whether they were charged with assorted crimes. We were not told anything and bundled into a bus. Where we were taken and why, was not known. Seated in the bus, I saw a constable outside my window and asked him where we were being taken. He said it could be to Vellore jail. I gave him our apartment telephone number and asked him to phone my wife and inform her, which he had done as I learnt later. Had the good policeman not obliged, my wife and children would not have known that I was not in Madras jail, but in Vellore jail more than a hundred miles away.

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The next few months I occupied one of the cells in a row in a compound that was out of bounds to other prisoners. Although there was provision for political detenus to be kept apart from other prisoners in more congenial surroundings, this was not done. The Deputy Jailor told me that since there were only three of us, it was not possible to make special arrangements for us, which meant that we were inmates in the same compound along with Sri Lankans guilty of petty crimes, and three or four Indians, harmless-looking human beings serving jail terms for murder and burglary. One elderly type who had killed his wife after he had caught her in a compromising situation with his friend, went about in a half-demented state, and would stand at the entrance to my cell expecting "beedis" or a banana or two, from the fruits which my wife brings for me on her twice-weekly visits. A young fellow on a burglary charge would entertain us by imitating the actor Rajnikanth for the price of a couple of "beedis", the poor man's smoke. Since cash was not allowed in prison, beedis were the popular currency. With a good stock of beedis, one could get anything done, including laundry services. Matches were taboo, but that was no problem. I was told even "ganja" could be got if one knew the right contacts. The warders were also helpful that way.

The most popular of the murder convicts was a young man called Jayaprakash who had made newspaper headlines by hacking to death his elder sister, her husband and their three or four children in one fell sweep. What made him do that multiple murder? It seems that the sister's husband was a regular drunkard who kept beating his wife, gave her no money even to feed her starving children, and Jayaprakash himself being only a student had no way of helping them. He had asked himself the question whether his sister and children deserved that kind of life? Wouldn't death be a blessing for them? Yes, he thought, and decided to play God, and relieve them of their miserable existence. About to be hanged after trial in that Vellore jail, there was a last-minute reprieve from the President and he was saved from the gallows. Jayaprakah was thereafter not only a model prisoner, respected and maybe feared by the jail staff, but he became my friend as well. Looking at his pleasant countenance, it was hard to believe that he could have committed

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such a horrible crime. Each morning, he would bring me the copy of *The Hindu*, the only English newspaper allowed which nobody else in our block of cells read. Even after I left jail and left India he would send a card of good wishes to me to my old address in Besant Nagar. There was one lesson that I learnt from jail life and that was - there were worse uncaught criminals in high places in public life outside, than those within prison bars!

Prison routine meant that we would be locked up from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. in our respective cells. Dinner would be served before lock-up time, and water for flushing the toilet, would be stored before that. A weak bulb on the verandah roof outside the cell door would remain lit the whole night. Each cell had a cemented bed with elevated headrest. Visitors were allowed on two prescribed days in a week. It meant a day's travel for my wife who had to take three buses either way to get to Vellore from Besant Nagar where we lived. Cooked food was not permitted, but bread, bananas, cigarettes, reading material (depending on the whim of the official) were allowed. Every other Tuesday I was taken along with my two assistants to mark our presence before the magistrate at Saidapet in Madras – **all the way by public transport, changing into three buses either way, with one hand manacled and led by a chain, as if leading a herd of cattle**. At the beginning, I used to feel the humiliation of it all, but the complete absence of any interest or curious looks by the mass of people on the road or by fellow bus passengers made me think that we were not in the public gaze. The people themselves seemed to go about with blank looks as if they have been desensitised to loss of human dignity.

One of my disappointments was that none of the Madras journalists whom I had known well, who surely knew what was happening to me, bothered to lift a finger to publicise the case of a fellow journalist. The single exception was the Tamil-language *Viduthalai*, the party organ of the Dravida Kazhagam edited by Rajendran. He sent a photographer to take a shot of me being led handcuffed by a policeman on one of my fortnightly visits to the Saidapet magistrate's court. The photographer who was first shooed away by

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policeman, persisted and managed to take a shot from some distance. The paper duly carried the picture, and said the party would legally challenge in courts the unlawful handcuffing of a political prisoner.

What was more heart-warming to me was that a leading Sri Lankan journalist in Colombo, a Sinhalese himself, should write in my defence where the fellow Tamil journalists in Madras (unfortunately many of them Brahmins) did not have either the will or courage to write a word in my favour. Ajith Samaranayake, who I believe was Deputy Editor of The Island at that time wrote in the Sunday issue of the paper dated 19th January, 1992, under the headline – S.Sivanayagam – THE JAILING OF THE EXILE:

> The man who masterminded the Tamil propaganda thrust into the world in the wake of the anti-Tamil riots of July 1983 has been languishing in an Indian jail for six months now. S.Sivanayagam, founder-editor of the *Saturday Review*, Jaffna, Editor-in-chief of the Tamil Information Centre in Madras from 1983 to 1987, and founder- editor of the *Tamil Nation* is sixty and a diabetic. Yet he has been held incommunicado in the jail at Vellore since July last year. Every two weeks he is brought manacled to the Saidapet Magistrate's Court and taken back.
>
> Subramaniam Sivanayagam (Siva to all his friends) is the most notable victim of the Indian Government's attitude towards Sri Lankan Tamils in Madras after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. While many Tamil activists went underground with proof of the LTTE's involvement in the murder surfacing, Siva was there as a sitting duck. He was back in his element editing the *Tamil Nation* after a period of inactivity after the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement. So they swooped down on him at his modest flat in Besant Nagar and took him away. They charged him with overstaying his visa and illegally publishing a newspaper among other things.

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> It is not as if either the officials of the Tamil Nadu State Government or the Indian Union Government were previously unaware of Sivanayagam's activities Since September 1983 he had been bombarding the world with Tamil propaganda literature first from Mahalingapuram and then Besant Nagar, a pleasant suburb of Madras with large leafy trees and residential avenues. He was a frequent speaker at seminars and meetings on the Tamil cause. Visiting journalists both Sri Lankan and foreign, never failed to make the pilgrimage to Besant Nagar to swap notes with him. All this he did with or without a visa and all this was public knowledge for eight long years while the futile war dragged on in the North-East of Sri Lanka and the diplomatic propaganda battle was fought in the chancellories and tribunals of the world.
>
> It is not necessary to agree with Sivanayagam's views to tell the Indian Government that all the offences he is charged with are bailable offences and that a 60-year old journalist is hardly threat enough to the Indian Union to be manacled to criminals in the Vellore jail and be cut away from his emotional and intellectual sources of sustenance. Sivanayagam can be charged and even deported but it is hardly humanitarian for the Indian Government to treat him like a criminal…..

Ajith went on to quote from my article published in the commemoration volume to K.Kanthasamy, how after a near 30-year work spell in Colombo, and "with three resignations to my credit" I went back to my roots in Jaffna to edit the *Saturday Review*. He wrote:-

> Two of those three resignations would have been from the *Times of Ceylon* and the Ceylon Tourist Board where he was Editor of its publications. In fact, it was then that I first met Siva as a reporter on the *Observer* covering a Tourist Board press

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conference to introduce some Scandinavian tour promoters at the Hotel Inter-Continental somewhere in 1976. It was twilight of the United Front Government and we talked of many things but hardly about the Tamil problem as I recall. Siva was very much the Jaffna Tamil long domiciled in Colombo and quite at home in media and official circles in the capital. The LTTE was still in the womb and it was almost possible to imagine that all was right with the world.

But when I met Sivanayagam in Madras in October 1987 we had both left behind long ago that insular little world. He had pulled up his roots, gone to Jaffna and begun the *Saturday Review* which had a spectacular effect on the petrified media world. His hard-hitting editorials from Chapel Street, Jaffna had a volcanic effect on the media world in Colombo. Then in July 1983 like many others he was compelled to flee across the Palk Straits.In September he resumed his collaboration with Kanthasamy at the Tamil Information Centre.

In October 1987, however, Siva was dismantling the Centre in the wake of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement. At the Besant Nagar office they were packing the stuff into large boxes and removing the posters from the walls. Siva was undecided what to do, whether to remain in Madras, return to Sri Lanka or go to London. Meanwhile, he was listening to cricket commentaries on a transistor (I forgot the match). During the course of a long, drowsy Madras afternoon he talked to me of his days as a young journalist at Lake House and the Times, his boarding house at Wellawatte, getting up late after a late night's work, a beer at noon at the Savoy Hotel, the leisurely ride on the top deck of the double decker to Lake House for another late night's work as a Sub Editor. Here was a man displaced from familiar sights, sounds and settings, looking back with profound nostalgia to

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his days of innocence and a world irrevocably extinguished by forces which the human heart has no control over. These familiar images had been displaced long ago by gunfire. But he was human enough to pine for them.

At 60, Sivanayagam is a journalist with an international reputation and whatever his views (which are passionately held) a man whom both Sri Lanka and India can be proud of. His detention at Vellore cannot enhance the reputation of the Indian Government. He should be released.

There was no shortage of appeals on my behalf. The Tamil Welfare and Human Rights Committee based in Washington, U.S.A. called upon all the foreign embassies in the country to "bring pressure upon the Prime Minister of India to secure the release of Mr.Sivanayagam". In London, representatives of the Tamil Forum, the International Federation of Tamils, Tamil Information Centre, Ganapathy temple Trust, Catholic Association of Tamils, UK, and the Tamil Congregation, London, met with K.M.Ratnakara , Minister at the Indian High Commission in London on the 29th July for an hour to express their grave concern. They called for intervention from the Prime Minister of India, and also handed over a letter addressed to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. The editor of *Tamil Times* sent a separate plea through the Indian High Commission. In India, several leading academics headed by Professor U.Munusamy of Loyola College sent a petition to the President of India. There were other representations as well.. But nothing worked. It was like what the Tamil proverb says "blowing a conch in a deaf person's ear".

As a long suffering diabetic, these jail experiences meanwhile were adding to my trauma, and I soon fell victim to a kind of dry eczema which affected both palms of the hands and the soles of my feet. Using my fingers to eat and even walking became painful. It was, I was to learn later, what doctors call a psychosomatic disease – a physical ailment that was mental in origin. On

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a petition made by my wife to the High Court in Madras, I was shifted back to Madras jail, to enable me to be treated at the Madras General Hospital (GH), which was next door to the jail. The Jailor, the prison official next below the Superintendent, showed some concern and personally admitted me to one of the common wards at the GH. But worse was to follow. A policeman was stationed at some distance to keep guard, but only after **I was handcuffed and chained to the bed!** The chain was removed only at mealtimes and when I had to go to the toilet, not even while I was sleeping. I asked the policeman, naturally with anger, why he had to chain me. He said that the order was all "Sri Lanka Tigers" had to be chained! I asked him who gave him the order? Did he think that I looked like a "Tiger" or did he think I looked the kind of person who would run away? There was no point in venting my anger at the poor fellow. He was only a small mindless cog in a vast faceless inhuman machine. Well, that meant another petition by my wife to the Madras High Court.

Amidst that trauma, there was a pleasant interlude as well. The policeman came up to my bed one day, unchained me and said the "big doctor" wanted to see me. He led me into a room at the end of the ward, and stood aside as an elderly, dignified gentleman rose from his chair, stretched his hand and asked me to sit down. He turned out to be Dr.Muthusethupathi, Professor of Nephrology at the Madras Medical College and Nephrologist at the Madras GH. I hadn't known him before but he said he had heard of me. He also knew what had happened to me from a friend who used to lend his copy of *Tamil Nation* to him. Obviously, he appeared to feel distressed at what was happening to me. He ordered me a cup of coffee, and as I rose to go, he shook hands again. I don't know what passed through the head of the policeman at watching the "big doctor" treating a man whom he chains, with such courtesy. It must have been a confusing experience to him without doubt!

The High Court's order was reassuring. It contained two directives, one to the police that I should **not be chained**, and that I should be housed in a paying ward ("provided the expenses are borne by the appellant"); the

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second directive to the chiefs of the diabetic and the skin clinics in the GH to forward to the Court a fortnightly report on my progress. After what I had gone through the previous agonising ten months, this was like a holiday. A separate room, with my wife or daughter bringing me home lunch and dinner every day, plenty of visitors in the evenings, four good mannered policemen supposed to keep guard but who turned out to be friendly companions, could I have asked for more? Two of the policemen, both by the name of Jaisingh, both Christians, and a third, Babu, an Andhraite, knew Chess, so it was a game of chess with them every morning after the doctor's visit. It was there I conceived the idea of writing this very book. One of my visitors was the late Rita Sebastian, my old *Daily Mirror* colleague and friend who dropped in accompanied by my wife. She went back to Colombo and I was pleasantly surprised when I received a cutting from the *Sunday Times*, Colombo, dated 3rd January, 1992. Under a strap line which said "In a prison without bars", a 7-column headline said- SIVA's HOSPITAL BED A NEWS DESK. It also carried a somewhat faded picture of me taken during the old *Daily Mirror* days. Since the article marked the end of my passage out of India, its proper place would be at the end of this chapter.

Meanwhile, it was decided that an appeal be made to the Supreme Court in Delhi against the Madras High Court's judgement dated 19 February 1992. The appeal was taken up only five months later, and a senior advocate N.Natarajan was entrusted with the brief. It was a waste of money and time, and three judges of the Supreme Court gave an order dated 15 July 1992 stating that they saw no new grounds to vary the High Court judgement. They also skipped the issue by stating, inter alia,: "We would have been inclined to give an opportunity but for the fact that time is running out because the detention order is likely to expire on 23rd July, 1992".

The National Security Act (NSA) 1980, under which I was detained prescribes the maximum period of detention as twelve months from the date of detention. When the end of those twelve months was nearing, I was looking forward to the day I would be back with my family. While I was

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counting the days for freedom, I did not realise someone up there in the Government office of the man with Christ and Gandhi in his name was also counting the days – but for a different purpose. On the very day, the 23rd July I was looking forward with hopeful anticipation to the order releasing me, a few policemen walked in and showed me an order. It was not the order I expected. It was an order, this time under the Foreigners Act, that I should be removed to the "Special Refugee Camp" at Vellore and detained there until further notice. Someone in high places was obviously motivated by sheer spite against me. It took me a few moments for the unpleasantness of the situation to seep in. I told the police officer that I had to consult my lawyer before accepting that order. My wife who had come in the meanwhile telephoned my lawyer Mr.Shanmugasundaram, who said he would send two of his assistants immediately. They went through the order and told me that in the given situation I had no option other than accepting it, but that they would challenge the order in courts the very next day. From Madras to Vellore, back to Madras and now it was Vellore again for me.

The so-called "Special Refugee Camp" at Vellore known as Tippu Mahal was situated inside the Vellore Fort. Although in legal terms, a special camp was not a jail or prison, with no warders inside, the security arrangements outside surpassed those in any of the prisons. A fact-finding team appointed by the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL) termed the fate of the inmates as "rigorous confinement". Their plight was worse than that of prisoners in the sense that there was no specific duration of confinement. It was a case of **indefinite incarceration**. When I was taken in there, I found there were nearly 200 inmates, all Sri Lankan Tamils, some of whom were languishing there for five or six years continuously. A few had lost count of the years. Some of the inmates were physically maimed persons. There was one who was totally blind. There were others who had lost their limbs. They had committed no crime, there was not even suspicion that they had done something unlawful, so why were they there? It repelled me to think that in a country described as the largest democracy in the world, such callousness on the part of the government could prevail.

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Thanks to my friends of the Tamil Forum Ltd. in London, who kept on financing my litigation, I was the fortunate one. The judges of the High Court were obviously irked that while I was held at the GH under court directive, the Government had thought it fit to act outside the court's jurisdiction by sending me to the Vellore Refugee Camp. After a stay of ten days inside, the court order came that I should be returned to custodial care at the Madras GH immediately. After a long delay in executing the court order and after the policemen who were to escort me back took time off to have their dinner, I was dumped late in the night at a common ward at the Madras hospital. There was no bed for me and a doctor who was doing the rounds began scolding me for seeking admission at that time of the night. I was too tired to explain to him that I was not there by my choice. I spent the rest of the night on the hospital floor, with no signs of the policemen who brought me. After a long delay the next day, my lawyers saw to it that I was back at the paying ward.

It was a peculiar situation for me now, both legally and personally. I had exhausted the one-year period under the NSA, and the Foreign Nationals Act under which I was taken to Vellore stood nullified by the court order returning me to police guard at the hospital. I was informed that the prosecution had appealed against the court order and was insisting that I be sent back to the Vellore "Special Refugee Camp". It was at this point that the suggestion was made to my wife by my counsel Shanmugasundaram, whether I would be prepared to ask High Court permission to leave the country. The alternative could be indefinite detention at Vellore. After a round of telephonic consultations my wife had with friends in London, Singapore and Hong Kong, it was decided to go for the first option. If the Government thought that my presence was a continuing threat to the security of that great country called India – no laughing matter – the logical thing would be to see me out. But such was the vindictiveness of the authorities, the Government counsel kept stonewalling the issue, by either asking for dates and then by insisting that I should in that case be sent back to Sri Lanka. The whole process took another five months of detention at the Madras GH, with chess, writing and

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visitors, to the great annoyance of a doctor who saw no reason why I should be there.

On the 10th January, 1993, officials of the "Q" branch took me to my flat at Besant Nagar. I spent the night with my family, and early morning next day, an Air India flight was to take me to Singapore, where I would be received by my friend Dr.G.K.Nathan, who was Co-Professor of Mechanical Engineering at the Nanyang University. We went to the airport in two cars, and I said farewell to my wife and children and to India, the country where my heart was, but whose politics and politicians I had learned to detest. It was during that period while waiting to fly out of the country that Rita Sebastian called on me. This is what she wrote:

> He has turned his hospital bed into a desk. And under cover of the ever watchful eye of an unarmed policeman, Sivanayagam has been spending the last few months of his incarceration, at the General Hospital in Madras, writing the contemporary history of Sri Lanka.
>
> It is not a mere recording of events . It is more personalised. He writes of the momentous changes in the island in the last two decades, and how it changed his own life. It is also a record of the thousands who fled the country in the face of the communal holocaust of 1983.
>
> Taken into custody under India's National Security Act, following the Rajiv Gandhi assassination, the past year and a half has been a traumatic experience for Siva. He remembers the night his flat in Madras was surrounded by hordes of policemen; the night in which he was taken in for questioning and which began for him a nightmarish ordeal.
>
> As editor of *Tamil Nation*, generally regarded as a pro-LTTE publication, Siva became a victim of circumstances. There were

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technical irregularities like the paper being printed in India without being registered, of funds coming into the country without Reserve Bank permission. Whatever the irregularities, they were not offences that warranted him being treated like a common criminal.

For months Siva was brought handcuffed to his two assistants (taken into custody with him), dragged by a lead chain from Vellore to Saidapet, a bus journey of three to four hours whenever they had to be produced in court. In public transport and on public highways, in the full glare of a curious crowd, Siva was treated like a criminal. And when he was ill and hospitalised he was chained to his bed. "I could sleep only on one side for the chain wouldn't allow me any movement on the other side", he recalls. "He recalls too how his feet and hands broke out into an eczema and he couldn't walk, and had to be carried to the toilet or to see his wife when she visited him in jail.

International pressures for Siva's release were ignored. In answer there were whispers of a dossier on him. And someone laid the publication of the "Satanic Forces", documentary evidence of the atrocities of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) in the island at Siva's doorstep.

For weeks now, in comparative comfort at the General Hospital, Siva has found time to reflect, to write, play chess with his "jailors" or read. His sense of humour hasn't left him. The bitterness of languishing in captivity , he has put behind him.

As we sat talking he was remembering the times when we were colleagues together on a newspaper in Sri Lanka when he conducted his weekly column "The Forum". He gathered around him then people whom he jealously regarded as his

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"Forum family", providing them a platform to air their views on men and matters.

Siva has travelled a long, hard road since then. When he left the *Times,* he edited the Saturday Review from Jaffna. When it was banned , he fled to India. First, in charge of the Tamil Information Centre, he later took to editing the *Tamil Nation*, followed by the setting up of the Research Institute of Tamil Affairs (RITA). I remember him sending me the first publication of the Institute with a note, half of the notepaper left blank so that, as he said, I would get over the fact that he had "institutionalised me in Madras". That was the Siva we have always known.

He has an irrepressible sense of humour. Thank God, it still remains with him. He needs it as he flies out of India in the next few days to find a home somewhere in some foreign country that will give him refuge. He needs it now....We can only wish him the best of luck.

Rita, who had been in touch with me since then, passed away three years later, on the 29th March, 1996. It was my turn to remember her, in a tribute I wrote in the inaugural issue of *Hot Spring* in May 1996.

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# Chapter 28

## 1991–1993 : More Assassinations and fall of Army Camps. Death of Kittu.

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# 1991–1993 : More Assassinations and fall of Army Camps. Death of Kittu.

One cannot think of any other country in the world that had seen so many political assassinations as Sri Lanka. The first of them took place early in the country's post-independence period, that of Prime Minister Solomon Dias Bandaranaike on September 25, 1959. As important as the victim was the assassin – a gun-toting Sinhalese Buddhist monk, in a country that parades the Buddhist faith to the world. The second one involved the Bandaranaike family again. The victim was Vijaya Kumaratunga, husband of Chandrika Bandaranaike, who was gunned down by a Sinhalese extremist on February 15, 1988. Then followed those of TULF leaders Appapillai Amirthalingam and Vettivelu Yogeswaran, on July 13, 1988, this time the perpetrators of the crime being the Tigers.

But the most number of assassinations took place within the four years 1991 – 1994, when Eelam war II began raging at its highest. While army camps were falling in the north, the war was effectively brought to Colombo as well. This period also marked a new phase in terror – the advent of suicide bombers into Colombo. The first of the assassinations was that of Sri Lanka's war minister Ranjan Wijeratne on March 2, 1991. Vice Admiral Clancy Fernando was victim of a suicide bomber in November 1992. The man in charge of the war during President Jayewardene's rule, Lalith Athulathmudali, was the next to get killed on April 23, 1993. Within a week, President Premadasa himself died at the hands of a suspected Tiger suicide assassin on May 1. The following year, it was another high-profile Cabinet Minister and President-aspirant Gamini Dissanayake who was killed on October 24, 1994.

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If one includes attempted assassinations, there was the incident on August 18, 1987, when hand grenades were tossed at President Jayewardene when he was chairing a meeting of the government parliamentary group in a committee room at the parliamentary complex. One grenade bounced off his table and hit Lalith Athulathmudali instead. Earlier, there was the near-fatal attack on Rajiv Gandhi by the naval sentry on the day of the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement on July 29. On August 8, 1992, Sri Lanka's top general Maj.Gen.Denzil Kobbekaduwa was killed in a landmine explosion in the north. This period also saw the death of LTTE top-ranker, Krishnakumar (Kittu) who died on the high seas on January 14, 1993

The month of June 1991 saw two notable tragedies. The first was the gruesome killings by the Sri Lankan army of a large number of innocent civilians at Kokkaddicholai in the Eastern Province. Provoked by a landmine blast that killed two soldiers on June 12 – the first anniversary of the beginning of Eelam War II – soldiers of the nearby army camp went on a wild rampage, and massacred nearly 150 Tamil civilians, including women and children on June 13. Many of them were hacked and beaten to death. Six schoolgirls from a nearby school including a 12-year old were reported to have been gang raped. TULF M.P. Joseph Pararajasingam was the first to raise the alarm, and after initial government attempts to minimise the tragedy, President Premadasa directed Prime Minister D.B. Wijetunga and Leader of the House Ranil Wickremasinghe to fly to the spot. A Commission of Inquiry was also appointed. Whether anything came out of it was not known. A retaliatory ambush by the Tigers in Trincomalee on June 20 claimed the lives of 19 soldiers, with seven more killed at Weli Oya the following day. Earlier, a Government offensive launched in the Vavuniya district on June 14 had resulted in more civilian casualties, with the Tigers claiming to have shot down an American-built Bell 212 helicopter.

But what shocked Colombo was the bomb blast that destroyed the Operational Headquarters of the Ministry of Defence on June 21. A van packed with heavy explosives, reportedly about 70 kilograms in weight

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and driven by a suicide bomber exploded at the gate of the Joint Operations Command (JOC) building. Official reports said at least 70 persons were killed, and more than 50 critically injured but independent reports put the death toll as high as 600. The JOC being located at an exclusive part of Colombo, extensive damage was caused to about 50 houses in the vicinity. About 20 vehicles were completely destroyed. Had the explosion taken place about five minutes later, it could have wiped out some of the top military officers who were due to go there for a scheduled meeting.

Meanwhile, up in the north, the LTTE mounted an attack on the Elephant Pass army camp on July 10. They fired mortars and rocket propelled grenades at the camp, and according to the Colombo newspaper *The Island, "within hours the defences of the camp cracked"*. (This newspaper, it must be noted, was then in clean editorial hands, and had not developed the racist overtones of later years). 800 servicemen belonging to the Sinha regiment who were trapped in the camp were reported to have been taken by surprise, as groups of cadres backed by improvised fighting vehicles made wave after wave of ferocious attacks. Elephant Pass, along with the Palaly airfield and the naval base at Karainagar were the only remaining government military outposts at that time, in an otherwise totally rebel-controlled Jaffna peninsula.

The Tigers maintained the siege of the camp for 24 days, while advancing 9 km. – a feat, described by a commentator as "demonstrating the LTTE's stamina and military skills". Sri Lankan correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* Manik de Silva reporting for that Hong Kong based journal of 22nd August said:

> "The conventional military balance between the Sri Lankan army and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas has narrowed despite the Tigers' eventual withdrawal in the face of an onslaught by government forces……Land access to the 800-strong garrison had long been cut by the Tigers, with resupply and casualty

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> evacuation of government troops relying solely on helicopters .....Colombo's air power advantage was reduced by the Tigers' newly enhanced anti-aircraft capability, which was able to stop helicopters landing in the camp. ....Colombo's military commanders opted to approach the camp by sea, establishing a beachhead at Vettilaikerni, 9 km. east of the besieged camp. Naval landing craft poured troops and equipment onto the secured beach-head under air cover. Then began an agonising slow march to Elephant Pass across ground strewn with anti-personnel mines. As the relief column marched forward, the Tigers pounded the besieged camp with rockets, mortars and artillery...."

Sri Lanka's amphibious rescue operation manned by 8,000 troops, and code-named "*Operation Balavegaya*" (Force) managed to break the siege by 3rd August. The casualties on both sides were high. The army said they lost 150 soldiers with another 600 wounded, and claimed they recovered the bodies of 425 Tigers. LTTE sources in Jaffna admitted to loss of 600 cadres with an estimated 1,000 wounded. It was a heavy price to pay in terms of human lives, but the Tigers were able to establish one irrefutable fact - that Sri Lanka had two armies not one!. *Asiaweek* magazine, Hong Kong, which featured Pirabakaran on the cover in its issue of August 23, 1991, commented : "*After eight years of civil war, Sri Lanka seems to have become an island of two nations*"

Although the Tigers stepped up their guerrilla attacks and landmine warfare in the East, the heavy casualties at Elephant Pass made them lose ground in the Mullaitivu area where they had their supply camps and training centres. In the East however, a Tiger ambush on August 2 resulted in the killing of 23 soldiers including three officers at Welikande in the Polonnaruwa-Batticaloa area. In contrast, an army operation code-named "*Akunupahara*" (Lightning Strike) led by Brigadier Janaka Perera caused the LTTE further loss of cadres at Mullaitivu. It was a case of fluctuating fortunes when using sea mines

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for the first time, the LTTE blew up a naval craft off the Jaffna coast in mid-September. At least ten naval men including two officers were reported killed. In Jaffna, in mid-October, the army launched *"Operation Valampuri"* and claimed that after ten days of fighting they had control of the entry points to the peninsula and that all the islands in the northern sea were also under their control.

Although there was a discernible feeling among the Sinhala parties, surprisingly within the SLFP itself, of the futility of war, the governing party could not summon the political will to offer any tangible proposals for a political settlement. Apart from his much celebrated remark that he would offer Tamils *"ellam"* (all) except Eelam, President Premadasa did nothing to give practical shape to what he meant by *"ellam"* A peace initiative by Cabinet Minister Thondaman got a favourable nod from the Tigers, but it never took off in the face of violent opposition from the Buddhist clergy. *"I appeal to the entire Sinhala race to rise against implementation of Thondaman proposals"*, said Walpola Rahula Thero, the influential Buddhist priest. *"Thondaman proposals are an attempt to reduce the majority community in this country to a minority and should be rejected outright with the contempt it deserves"*, said the even more powerful priest, Ven.Madihe Pannaseeha Thera in a statement in the Colombo newspaper, the *Sunday Times*, on 29 December.

The President meanwhile was facing a growing challenge to his leadership within the UNP, led by two of the high-profile party stalwarts who were downgraded by him– Gamini Dissanayake and Lalith Athulathmudali. They accused him of running a highly centralised and personalised form of government, and followed it up with tabling an impeachment motion against him. SLFP leader Sirima Bandaranaike and other opposition groups seeing an opportunity in this to topple Premadasa also joined the campaign. What was worse, the President was fast losing his majority in Parliament. The impeachment motion was signed by 47 ruling party members, and that, along with Opposition votes would have brought about the downfall of

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the government. A tough campaigner himself, Premadasa fought back. He unleashed a massive media onslaught against what he termed "conspirators" "disgruntled legislators" and "vested interests funded by casino owners". He expelled some dissidents, cajoled back the rest with the help of his powerful party secretary Sirisena Cooray and prorogued parliament. He had successfully staved off the political crisis for the time being, but there was no respite for him either politically or militarily.

In its war against the Tamil Tigers, the Government could not spare even places of religious worship. On May 18, 1992, army men encamped at Mullaitivu launched artillery shell attacks at the historic Vattrapalai Amman temple at a time when thousands of devotees congregate for the annual Pongal ceremony. With the first shell, the people began fleeing from the temple premises, nevertheless several were killed, including Red Cross volunteers on duty. On the 31st May, the Thurkai Amman temple at Tellippalai was bombed from the air, damaging the temple and killing several devotees.

On the 11th July 1992, the Vannankulam (renamed in Sinhala as "Katupotha") army camp on the Vavuniya-Mannar Road was wiped out by the Tigers, killing at least 52 soldiers and wounding eleven others. They set fire to the camp before withdrawing with a big haul of weapons and ammunition. Many women Tigers had participated in the attack. The army's earlier claim that they had taken control of the outlying islands off Jaffna soon blew up in their face by a shocking incident that happened at Kayts island on 8th August 1992. Sri Lanka's top military commander in the North, Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa and nine other senior officers were killed in a landmine explosion. That was the most serious blow for the Premadasa government in the two years of its war. BBC quoting the Tigers who said they had carried out the attack, also quoted them saying: *"the Government of Sri Lanka had to realise the futility of finding a military solution to the Tamil question"*. The others who died in the blast included Brigadier General Vijaya Wimalaratne, Navy Commodore Mohan Jayamaha, three full Colonels and a Major. Commodore Jayamaha who handled naval operations in the northeast

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had had specialised training in India, Britain and Australia.

Interestingly, Sinhalese anger over the killings turned not against the Tigers or Tamil civilians, but at the government. An AFP report of August 11 said:

> "Angry mourners stoned ministers and beat up a close associate of President Premadasa at an emotional funeral here yesterday for Sri Lanka's top army commander killed by Tamil guerrillas, witnesses said. State Minister for Foreign Affairs John Amaratunga was hit on the head by a missile and police responded by firing teargas to keep back unruly crowds who later torched two police motor bikes outside the Colombo General cemetery."
>
> "Dayan Jayatillaka, a close associate of Premadasa, was stripped naked and beaten and paraded inside the cemetery, witnesses said, adding that three others and a Buddhist monk, also close to the Government, were badly beaten up....."

As the war dragged on, the government continued to lose face. On 27th August the Tigers hijacked a Sri Lankan Navy "Water Jet" speedboat off the coast of Mandaithivu. Sea Tigers had swum up to the boat, cut the cable, pushed it into mid sea and then started the engine. The "Water Jet" was a novel speedboat used by navies in the West. 60 feet long and 17 feet wide, it was fitted with a 50 inch anti-aircraft gun and contained sophisticated and modern telecommunication equipment. It had 9,000 rounds of ammunition when seized. Unlike other boats, it needed special training to operate it. The Sri Lankan naval authorities were reportedly mystified as to how the Tigers got the boat going. Fearing that the boat in the possession of the LTTE could be a serious threat in the sea, the Navy was put on a 24-hour "Red Alert".

On October 9, amid mounting losses of troops and armaments, President Premadasa ordered drastic changes in the command structure of the armed

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forces. By special gazette notification, he transferred power from the three armed forces commanders and the police chief to a single general heading a special military unit. The man given total charge as head of the Joint Operations Command (JOC) was Hamilton Wanasinghe, the only serving four-star general at that time. Army commander Cecil Waidyaratne who was to retire the following year was to be under the directions of the JOC. The JOC in fact, had been in existence since 1984, and it was Premadasa himself who had given operational command on the field to the respective defence chiefs in March. However, it was felt that after that change military losses had mounted rapidly, with a monthly average of more than 100 soldiers killed, and desertions rising sharply. Some 3,700 men had left the army according to military sources. There were also internal squabbles among the high command. Differences between the Defence Ministry, the JOC and the three commanders of the army, navy and air force were "open secrets", according to the knowledgeable Defence Correspondent of the Colombo newspaper, *Sunday Times*.

But nothing could check the increasing demoralization among the armed forces. In desperation, they resorted to the one aspect of warfare that they thought was safe – bombing civilian areas from the air or shelling coastal villages from the sea. Idaikadu, Thondamanaru, Moolai and Ponnalai were shelled for several hours on the night of 21st October, while on the 26th and 27th, Alaveddy, Tellippalai and Vasavilan came under aerial bombing. On the night of 2nd January 1993, Sri Lankan naval gunboats turned their guns on a flotilla of sixteen boats carrying unarmed civilians across the Kilali lagoon. In the blinding glare of a spotlight they killed over 50 and injured another 15. The bodies of six women and eight men were found later to have been washed ashore in the lagoon in the Kilinochchi district. One boat reached the shores with the entire occupants found dead. In a similar attack in December, 15 civilians were killed. These attacks were obviously done in a spirit of vengeance following the dramatic assassination of Navy chief Vice Admiral Clancy Fernando. He was blown to bits when on 21st November, a suicide

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killer drove his motorcycle loaded with bombs headlong into his vehicle in the heart of Colombo.

If 1983 was a tragically definable year for the Tamil people, ten years later history turned full circle and saw the Sri Lankan military losing as many lives on the battlefields. The year 1993 however began with a heavy blow for the LTTE. They lost the man, who, next to Pirabakaran, mattered the most for them. On Wednesday January13, the cargo ship m.v.Ahat was **unlawfully** intercepted by the Indian Navy in international waters in the Indian Ocean. They challenged the ship about 290 miles east of Hambantota in the south of Sri Lanka and about 440 miles south east of India. The boat was carrying Sathasivam Krishnakumar, known as Kittu to everyone, and No.2 in the Tiger hierarchy. The ship was forced to travel to the South Indian coast by Indian Navy frigates. Kittu, realising the Indian intention to take him captive, took his own life. Indian authorities knew only too well that the Tigers never allow anyone to take them alive. **India had exacted her revenge for the IPKF debacle at the hands of the LTTE and for the killing of Rajiv Gandhi. But Kittu's life was far more precious to the Tamil people than Rajiv Gandhi's to India.**

The news of the interception was first released from Paris by LTTE spokesman Lawrence Thilagar in the early afternoon of Friday, January 15. Indian authorities blacked out all news of the interception for more than 36 hours, and refused to confirm or deny the news for another 24 hours. Eventually, on the afternoon of January 16, they said that the ship in which Kittu was travelling had exploded and that Kittu was not one of the survivors. It was undoubtedly a high-handed act of piracy on international waters. Tens of thousands of Tamils in various capitals of the world mourned for Kittu, in vivid contrast to the absence of such popular grief in India when Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated. Kittu, born on 2nd January 1960, was 33 when he died. With Kittu's death there was a question that remained unanswered: Who had leaked the information about Kittu's coming? It was not as if the Indian Navy stumbled on to the merchant vessel Ahat. They had gone beyond

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Indian waters looking for the ship. Whether the information was given to RAW unwittingly or whether it was passed on to them by design was later to cast suspicion on Mahattaya. That was one of the reasons that resulted in his execution.

While Kittu's death had no bearing on Sri Lankan politics in the south, the ten days between April 23 and May 1 were to rock the political process in Colombo with two deadly assassinations. The electioneering campaign for the May 17 Provincial Council elections in the south was in full swing when both assassinations happened. It was as if the run-up to the Presidential election the following year had already begun. The Democratic United National Party (DUNF) headed by Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake was offering a winning challenge to President Premadasa, when fate intervened. On the night of April 23, the 57-year old Athulathmudali was shot at point blank range by an unknown man while addressing an election meeting at Kirillapone, a suburb of Colombo. Although rushed to the General Hospital, it was too late. He collapsed in the operating theatre.

As was to be expected, the Government mounted a media campaign to pin the blame on the LTTE, but the DUNF leaders themselves held Premadasa responsible – directly or indirectly – for the crime. In an interview with *The Hindu* correspondent in Colombo, Gamini Dissanayake said:

> "We see a sinister effort by the Government in blaming and identifying an alleged LTTE assassin. The Government media is repeatedly drumming this every hour in an attempt to abort the elections ...Lalith has been killed because the DUNF was heading for a landslide already. It would have been impossible for the government or President Premadasa to continue to govern after losing the provincial elections...." (*Frontline*, May 21, 1993)

*The Economist*, London, in its issue of May 1, said in a report sent by its Colombo correspondent :

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> "Near to the spot where the shooting took place the police found the body of a young man. He had bullet wounds said to have been inflicted by Mr.Athulathmudali's bodyguard..... The bodyguard said he had shot at the assassin, but believed he had missed. The assassin, he said, wore a black shirt. The man found by the police wore a white shirt. Many Sri Lankans are sceptical of the Government's instant solution to the murder..."

It took another three years for the truth to be out. The Government-owned *Sunday Observer* of April 7, 1996 reported that underworld gangsters were involved in the killing. A technician who operated the sound system at the meeting addressed by Athulathmudali "positively identified" one Priyankara Jayamanne, alias "Sudhu Mahathaya" at the identification parade, as the person who shot the DUNF leader. The suspect is already in custody, police told the *Sunday Observer*. "Witnesses at the identification parade have observed that the actual suspect "Sudhu Mahataya" has facial features similar to that of Ragunathan whose body was found at Mugalan Road after Mr.Athulathmudali's assassination. Ragunathan was earlier identified as the assassin. The new identification has been corroborated by Shalila Munasinghe, a personal aide of Mr.Athulathmudali, police said".

Just eight days later, came the most gory assassination of all, that of President Premadasa himself. It was May Day and the President was leading the UNP procession. Wearing a green cap with "victory" written on it, he was busy directing the procession at the Armour Street junction (which was blocked to traffic) when a cyclist who was in a feeder procession approached the main rally. Upon his being stopped by security personnel, a huge explosion occurred. The President and 24 others, including the entire entourage of bodyguards and personal assistants were dead. A correspondent's report sent to *The Economist*, London, the same day said:

> "...So chaotic and grim was the scene, with parts of bodies blown all over the Armour Street junction, that for a time no

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one was sure whether Premadasa, 68, was among them.... The impact of the blast was so large that it had taken more than two hours for the President's personal physician to identify what was left of the President's body. "The place was a shambles. There were arms, limbs and human flesh all over the place", said Sydney Chandrasena, a television producer at the scene. Exactly what had happened was not immediately clear. Some eye witnesses said a man on a bicycle carrying a portable radio rode up to Premadasa and his staff as the President prepared to greet the march. Others reported that a motor cyclist with explosives strapped to his body crashed into the group. Colombo police were sure of one thing however; the killing was the work of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ...The modus operandi was that of a fanatic LTTE suicide squad known as the Black Tigers."

"As usual, the LTTE quickly denied involvement in the killing. "The government blames the LTTE for everything" said Paris-based spokesman Lawrence Thilagar, "But Premadasa had enemies everywhere"....Public reactions to Premadasa's death were mixed. Some celebrated the news by setting off fireworks in parts of Colombo and particularly in the south of the country, where government death squads in 1989 had mercilessly put down a rebellion led by the People's Liberation Front (JVP), a Sinhalese extremist group opposed to India's involvement in the nation's affairs....."

Colombo's correspondent for *Frontline* (no friend of the LTTE) reported in the issue of May 21:

"... The trunk of the suspected assassin was blown off, and only the portions above the chest, and the feet remained. Perhaps that was why even 24 hours after the blast the police were

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> unwilling to come out with an official version of the explosion..... The suspected assassin was stated to be young, perhaps around 20 ....While the needle of suspicion has magnetically swung to the LTTE, nobody seemed to be in a hurry to pinpoint the assassin. Copies of his photograph were circulated to Tamil groups such as the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP, the People's Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOT), and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation(TELO) in a bid to identify him. Tamil sources told *Frontline*: The person seems to be well-built, clean-shaven and looks to be a Sinhala". That is the rub".

On May 7, Prime Minister Dingiri Banda Wijetunge, 71, a low-profile middle class Kandyan was sworn in as acting President. The Provincial Council elections were to be held as scheduled on May 17. After the forceful rule of Premadasa for the past three and a half years, the arrival of lacklustre Wijetunge seemed as if an era had ended in Sri Lankan politics. Wijetunga's signature tune that there was no ethnic problem in the country, only a terrorist problem, was to soon bring him the unenviable distinction of presiding over a series of major military debacles within six months of his rule. July 25 was the tenth anniversary of the 1983 pogrom, and if the Sri Lankan army had forgotten about it, the Tigers did not. They captured three army camps the same day, the biggest of the three, being Janakapura.

The *Sunday Times*, Colombo, in its issue of August 1 ran the headline **– Janakapura's day of the jackal: Army suffers worst defeat in Eelam war as camp run over.** The paper's "Military Affairs Correspondent" wrote a long lament about what happened. Starting off in a literary style,

> "The calm breeze that swept across the Sri Lanka Army camps at Kokkutuduwai , located cheek by jowl with the Kokilai lagoon and Kovil Point, on the sea front along the Mullaitivu coast, lowered the sizzling noon temperatures considerably..... It was the dawn of Sunday, July 25....

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He came to the point soon after. Some excerpts –

> " Then suddenly, in what appeared to be a well-co-ordinated exercise, Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) and mortar fire began to hit the two camps. Both Kokkutuduwai and Kovil Point army camps were now under attack by Tiger terrorists.... Logistically they expected the back-up support to come from the Janakapura army camp, eight kilometres away. Meanwhile, unknown to officers and men involved in this drama, something more sinister was taking place at the Janakapura Army Camp – the main base in the Weli Oya sector responsible for securing the string of civilian settlements there. **The camp has been so named after Brigadier Janaka Perera , now commander of the Special Forces Brigade, which includes the elite Commando Regiment and the Rapid Deployment Force. As a Colonel, he was one of the pioneers in helping the then Government to set up and secure these civilian settlements."** *(Emphasis this writer's.)*

These civilian settlements were part of the Government's ethnic cleansing of Tamil areas and the carving out of Sinhalese settlements with Sinhalese names with a view to cut off the contiguity of Tamil areas between the north and east. These army camps were set up for the precise purpose of safeguarding these settlements from Tiger attacks. "Brigadier" Janaka Perera was to become not only a highly-acclaimed General, but in the tradition set by Junius Jayewardene of giving diplomatic prizes for military failures, sent by a subsequent government as High Commissioner to democratic Australia. The *Sunday Times* report continues:

> "Barely an hour after midnight, men inside the Janakapura Camp were in for shock and horror. Without much ado, heavily armed Tiger terrorists in fatigues were swarming all over their camp. There were both men and women. Some walked towards



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> the Camp's Signals Room and hurled grenades.....This blacked out radio communication in and out of Janakapura. That was why the Base Camp at Gajapura, the camps at Kokkutuduwai and Kovil Point encountered radio silence. The attacks on the latter camps had been a bogey run to divert reinforcements... The real target was Janakapura.....In less than three hours, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had accomplished their biggest ever victory in the nearly two-decade long separatist war by not merely overrunning an Army Camp but by getting away with military hardware and war-like material estimated to be worth over Rs.50 million. That again was after meticulously executing a guerrilla exercise where it suffered little or no casualties in both men and material. LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran dubbed the offensive by some 250 men and women as "Ithaya Bhoomi One" or "Heart-Land One", a label which portended that more similar assaults were on the cards. It was led by his confidante and Wanni leader, Jeyam..... The immediate outcome of the attack on Janakapura was the exodus of (Sinhalese) settlers...."

The *Sunday Times* writer, while unable to hide his secret admiration for the LTTE's military prowess, also sorrowfully quoted an "embarrassed senior security official" as saying,

> "It looks as if we are being unwittingly forced to plan for the enemy's capability too, when we formulate our defence budget". He was underscoring the concern over how the enemy is becoming stronger by seizing our own weapons firstly at Vettilaikerny (over Rs.50 million) and now at Janakapura, another Rs.50 million. The spiralling defence budget stood at Rs.20,000 million (US dollars 476 million) last year. Ten years ago, in 1982, it was a mere Rs.1,400 million (or US dollars 67 million)."

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While the paper gave a full list of the booty captured by the LTTE, the editorial headline said – DAY OF SHAME. Janakapura was not only a military failure, it was a betrayal of the Sinhalese settlers. The Government having planted those poor, uneducated, landless people to further a political agenda could not protect either their lives or property. They were made refugees and housed at the nearby Nikawewa Maha Vidyalaya.

On September 28, the Sri Lankan Army embarked upon a 15-day offensive code-named "Operation Yaldevi." A special task force moved out of Elephant Pass with the immediate objective of destroying the Sea Tiger facilities in Kilali en route to Chavakachcheri and with the ultimate objective of taking Jaffna. Jaffna meanwhile was being bombed from the air. Everything started off well, but on the second day the exercise suffered a setback. Col.Sarath Fonseka was advancing with an infantry column from Pooneryn (Poonagari), towards Chavakachcheri when he faced a massive frontal assault by the LTTE. A bloody battle ensued with the LTTE raining mortars, rocket propelled launchers and heavy machine gun fire on the troops and the tanks leading the assault. Two Czech supplied Main Battle Tanks (MBT) were soon ablaze with the men inside. This single encounter left more than seventy soldiers, all from the same battalion, dead. For six days, the Colombo Press carried headlines such as "Troops advance under fire", "Noose tightens around Tigers' neck", but at the end of it all the feeling in Colombo was that it was back to Square One. The Defence Ministry belatedly announced that it was a "limited operation" and the troops were returning to base. An estimated 125 soldiers were dead and equipment worth several millions of rupees were lost. Convoys of LTTE boats resumed their crossings from Kilali to Punchiparanthan, although General Waidyaratne in Colombo denied it, when questioned by the *Sunday Times*.

The Sri Lankan army's biggest reverse was yet to come. On 11th November, the Pooneryn-Nagathevanthurai army and navy bases crumbled under the LTTE's ground and amphibious assault, code-named "*Operation Frog Jump*". In a statement faxed to news agencies in Colombo the LTTE



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said they had killed 1,000 soldiers and sailors and lost 411 of their own fighters in the battle. They said they had captured five navy boats, two battle tanks and infantry weapons. Reuters quoted the military as saying that bodies of 194 soldiers, including six officers, had been recovered, and another nine officers, 428 soldiers and about 200 sailors were still missing in action. (Reuter, Nov.20).

The *Sunday Island* writer Shamindra Fernando, reporting in the issue of the paper dated 21st November, *said:*

> "...The attack on army and navy defences had commenced at about 1 a.m. on November 11. Amphibious and ground assault groups had attacked Nagathevanthurai navy base and two army camps in the Pooneryn area simultaneously. There had been about 275 navy personnel stationed in the Nagathevanthurai base, specially set up to monitor and intercept Sea Tiger and civilian boat traffic in the disputed Jaffna lagoon.....Survivors had claimed that they were forced to abandon the base after they ran out of ammunition. For the navy there had been no outside support. The Sea Tigers leading the assault were quick in capturing five 30-feet long inshore patrol craft mounted with powerful Five Zero guns and destroying radar used successfully to track down boat movements in the lagoon.... Nagavanthevanthurai was the first navy base to be overrun by the LTTE in the Eelam war".

A second article in the same issue of the paper in posing the question – What went wrong? – said:

> " The total number of security forces personnel at Pooneryn was well over 2000. In two days, the LTTE killed between 400 and 600 soldiers, including at least 15 officers, over 100 sailors, **and walked off with all five Inshore patrol craft, one T-85 tank, one T-65 tank, one 106mm recoilless anti-**

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**tank gun, two 120mm mortars, a dozen five zero machine guns, three grenade launchers, 50 light machine guns, and about 400 rifles, as well as a huge stock of ammunition for all these weapons. Nearly 600 other soldiers and sailors were wounded, and a Pucara ground attack aircraft was damaged...."**

The response of the Sri Lankan military was predictable. The Air Force took their anger on the civilian population of Jaffna through a series of bombings from the safety of the air causing several civilian casualties.

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# Chapter 29

## 1994–1995 : Chandrika in power; Peace Talks end in War

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# 1994–1995 : Chandrika in power; Peace Talks end in War

One of the bedevilling factors of Sri Lankan politics was the difficulty in containing the Bandaranaike clan's thirst for political power. They had always suffered under the mistaken belief that they, they alone, had the divine right to rule the country. What was worse, they had made the Sinhalese voters also to believe that. Paterfamilias Solomon Bandaranaike rode to power at the expense of the Tamils, but he could not enjoy power for more than three and a half years. The very forces that he created killed him. The widow, Srimavo, came straight from the kitchen and ruled the country for two terms. It was Junius Richard Jayewardene, who, for his own political designs thought of a bright idea of halting the Bandaranaikes' march to power. He muzzled his only political rival by stripping Srimavo Bandaranaike of her civic rights for six years. But the Bandaranaikes were never far away from the fringes of power. They were there, hovering in the wings, prowling in the shadows, waiting for their chance. The years 1993- 1994 brought in a new Bandaranaike, daughter Chandrika. It was steady climb for her on the political ladder, from being elected head of the Provincial Council in Colombo in 1993, to become Prime Minister at the parliamentary elections in August the following year, and to be elevated as Executive President in October thereafter.

One of the best things that happened to this second daughter was her marriage to handsome Vijaya Kumaratunga, who was not only a popular cinema personality, but a refreshingly different kind of politician. He was a healthy influence on her as long as the marriage lasted. After his assassination, Chandrika left for England and lived there in exile off and on for nearly five

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years. At the parliamentary elections of August 1994 the People's Alliance (P.A), a 11-party coalition, nominally headed by Srimavo Bandaranaike, but led by daughter Chandrika, edged out the UNP, winning 105 seats as against the UNP's 94. Chandrika was sworn in as Prime Minister on August 19. It meant the eclipse of the UNP after 17 years in power. *Asiaweek* magazine (August 31, 1994) commented:

> "On the day she was to be sworn in as prime minister of Sri Lanka, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga visited her mother. She didn't have to go far. The entire Bandaranaike clan, including brother Anura, an opposition politician lives together in a three-house compound along Rosmead Place, a narrow street in Colombo's exclusive Cinnamon Gardens district. Spotting an army of journalists camped on the front porch, Kumaratunga, 49, hitched up her blue ceremonial saree, leaped nimbly over some flower pots the way she did as a girl and entered the house by a side door. Inside the colonnaded old mansion Buddhist monks chanted hymns as she knelt and received her mother's blessing.
>
> "Half an hour later, after another short journey to the President's house, she was officially the Prime Minister, the second woman to hold the position after her mother and the third PM in the family since her late father Solomon. "Now that Chandrika is in power I can die in peace," said matriarch Sirimavo Bandaranaike, 78. But it was clear that the world's first woman Prime Minister, though ailing, wasn't about to fade into the background. Appointed minister without portfolio in her daughter's cabinet, she quipped: "I'm now like Lee Kuan Yew – in a position to advise the government as a senior minister".

Despite her mother's presence in the background, Chandrika presented a new face before the electorate. A Sorbonne education in Paris, the image of a



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widow with two children, a return from exile, they all contributed towards a new image of her. To a country groaning under what seemed an endless war, her talk of peace, an end to war and ethnic reconciliation sounded enticing; more so to the Tamil people who were at the receiving end of the UNP's oppressive rule. In extending a hand of friendship to the LTTE, she relaxed the UNP's embargo on certain items within a fortnight of assuming office. Although the LTTE was sceptical of her motives, they responded positively to her friendly gestures.

On September 2, LTTE leader Pirabakaran issued a Press statement welcoming the Prime Minister's expressions of goodwill. While urging her to lift the economic embargo totally, he offered a permanent cease-fire and unconditional talks. He also made a tangible gesture in releasing ten policemen held in LTTE custody as prisoners of war. One week later, on September 9, Chandrika sent a cordial letter to the LTTE leader through the ICRC. She wrote:-

> "Dear Mr.Pirabakaran, We are happy to note that the LTTE has welcomed our gesture of goodwill towards the people of Jaffna and North in lifting the embargo imposed by the previous Government. We appreciate the decision taken by the LTTE to release ten police detainees who were held in the LTTE custody for several years and consider this gesture as one of goodwill and a demonstration of your positive intentions to negotiate the solutions to the problems of north and East....."

The letter went on to invite the LTTE to nominate their representatives for peace talks, and promising "to restore, as far as possible, electricity and repair of major highways and part of the irrigation schemes, as further normalisation of civil life". (*The Politics of Duplicity: Re-visiting the Jaffna Talks.* Anton Balasingham, Fairmax Publishing Ltd. 212, Manor Way Mitcham, CR4 1EL, Surrey, England).

This was the first instance of a Sri Lankan head of government addressing

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a letter to the LTTE leader who had all along been designated as a "terrorist". While this seemed to imply the acceptance of the LTTE's role as the political representatives of the Tamils, Chandrika's subsequent postures were to bring misgivings about her true intentions. Chandrika's election victory however was not entirely a rosy one. Small parties held the balance in the 225-seat parliament. The addition of seven members of the Muslim Congress and one independent allowed her to squeak in with a majority of just one. UNP's Gamini Dissanayake made a last-minute attempt to block her accession by trying to persuade smaller parties to join the UNP in a minority government. But this move was thwarted by outgoing Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe who advised the President to declare Mrs.Kumaratunga the winner. Two days after her appointment, however, three main Tamil parties, which commanded seventeen seats among them, promised to support her government on an issue-by-issue basis. While the Prime Minister kept for herself the cabinet portfolio of Ethnic Affairs and National Integration, she brought in a Colombo-based Tamil by the name of Lakshman Kadirgamar as an appointed MP to hold the portfolio of Foreign Minister. The UNP's Wijetunge, 72, was to continue as president until the presidential elections in November.

The Presidential election of November 9 was to be a straight contest between Prime Minister Kumaratunga and UNP nominee Gamini Dissanayake. As the electioneering proceeded, it was becoming clear that Chandrika was the favourite. After seventeen years of UNP rule the Sinhalese voters were themselves longing for a change. Thondaman's plantation vote bank which had been with the UNP was virtually lost because of Wijetunge's hidden animosity against the plantation Tamils. The Kandyan middle class grievance that the Tea industry had appropriated lands that rightly belonged to the Kandyan peasantry was to Wijetunge a bee constantly buzzing in his bonnet! It was the British ruler who should be blamed anyway, not Thondaman, nor the poor exploited labourers. Two weeks before the Presidential election however, fate intervened. Gamini Dissanayake was assassinated.

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It was a midnight hour that took the life of Gamini Dissanayake. Winding up an election rally in Colombo's Grandpass slum district on Sunday October 23, he waved to the crowd, looked at his watch and quipped: "I should say good night, but it is past midnight. So, good morning to you all". It was in fact goodbye.! Then followed a devastating explosion believed to have been triggered by a suspected suicide bomber, who, police said had been sitting in the second row of the audience. The blast took away the lives of 56 people including Gamini Dissanayake, and some VIPs in the front row, leaving their charred and mutilated remains on the blood-spattered road. A heavily bleeding Dissanayake was rushed to the government hospital, but doctors' attempts to revive him could not succeed. The Chandrika government called off the second round of peace talks scheduled to be held in Jaffna the following day. When the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) contacted the LTTE to convey this news, a Tiger spokesman had expressed shock at the assassination and denied complicity. Although the Tigers' guilt was never proved, the police maintained that both motive and *modus operandi* pointed to the involvement of the LTTE. "We believe the severed head of a woman found on top of a two-storied building near the blast was that of a suicide bomber", police said.

A week before the assassination, a team of four government peace negotiators had landed by helicopter at the grounds of the Jaffna University and was mobbed by hundreds of Tamil well-wishers, so high were the expectations over the peace process. The President of the University's teachers association A.J.V.Chandrakanthan was quoted by *TIME* magazine (November 7) as praising Mrs.Kumaratunga's statesmanship. "*Just the fact that they could land an air force helicopter here in Jaffna, which is designated as enemy territory, is ground-breaking*", he said. It must be remembered that at that point of time, Jaffna was under the control of the Tigers, with the administration totally in their hands.

The death of a presidential candidate did not mean the postponement of the election. The Constitution had already provided for such an eventuality.

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There was provision for a recognised political party to field a new candidate within three days of the death of its nominee. The process had to be gone through by November 19, and the new President sworn in on November 23. In the Sri Lankan as well as the South Asian tradition of widows stepping into the shoes of their dead husbands, Gamini Dissanayake's widow Srima was persuaded to hand in her nomination papers as UNP candidate. It was a futile move. Had Gamini Dissanayake lived to contest, in all probability he himself would have lost.

Meanwhile, between her taking office as Prime Minister on August 19 and Gamini Dissanayake's death on October 23, Mrs.Kumaratunga had exchanged three letters with LTTE leader Pirabakaran through that tireless messenger, the ICRC. The first round of talks took place in Jaffna on October 13 and 14. Leading the Government delegation was K.Balapatabendi, Secretary to the Prime Minister. Other members were Lionel Fernando, Secretary to the Ministry of Information, R.Asirwatham Chairman, Bank of Ceylon and Navin Gooneratne, an architect. As they got off the helicopter at the University grounds, they were formally welcomed by Anton Balasingham and Tamilselvan. Armed LTTE cadres thereafter escorted them to their residence. The talks were held with the LTTE flag and Pirabakaran's photograph occupying centre stage and LTTE men videoing the proceedings. The LTTE were disappointed with the composition of the Government team. It seemed that the four members were good listeners, but only personal messengers from the Prime Minister with no mandate to commit themselves to any decisions.

*(Lionel Fernando of course was a well-known face in Jaffna. He had served there as a Government Agent and was immensely popular with the people. When his mother passed away in Jaffna during his tenure as G.A. he preferred to have her cremated in Jaffna itself. It was said that the crowds that attended the funeral were only second largest to the ones that attended Tamil leader Chelvanayakam's).*

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The LTTE delegation was led by K.Karikalan, Deputy Leader, Political Section. Other members were S.Elamparithy, Political Organiser, Jaffna District, A.Ravi, Head of Department, Economic Research and Development and S.Dominique, Head of Department of Public Administration. The LTTE's position was that priority should be given to address the immediate problems faced by the Tamil people. Without normalisation of civilian life, there was no point in going into political issues. Sometime in mid-September, a group of six Colombo-based foreign journalists met with Anton Balasingham and head of the Political Section Tamilselvan at the LTTE's political office at Chundikuli. One of the journalists, V.Jayanth representing *Frontline* magazine carried a comprehensive account of the interview in the issue of the magazine dated October 21, 1994. Some excerpts – (Anton Balasingham) :

> **Q:** Do you think the peace moves are related to the presidential elections?
>
> **A:** The presidential elections are crucial because whoever wants to resolve this problem must have adequate political authority to control the military and effect constitutional changes and have an overall authority in decision-making. Chandrika has limited powers. She does not enjoy a majority in Parliament, she relies on minority votes. There is another Government by the President, who enjoys prerogative powers. I think the elections are crucial. We want a stable government to resolve this problem….". (to an earlier question) "…But there seem to be two governments in Colombo and the armed forces are under President D.B.Wijetunga**…. without the cooperation of the armed forces, it will be very, very difficult to conduct the peace process."**

(These words were to prove prophetic in the years of the new millennium when President Chandrika began blocking the peace process initiated by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe who was in an identical position as

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she was when Prime Minister- without a stable majority in parliament. As the saying goes, the more things change, the more they are the same!)

> **Q:** Don't you think that at the end of the negotiations, you will get something substantially less than what you already enjoy? After 15 years of struggle and the loss of human lives, is it worthwhile accepting anything less?
>
> **A:** I do not think like that……It is not only what we have or enjoy; what we need is international recognition of what we enjoy. That is most crucial for us. We may run an administration here that may seem to be an independent state**. But recognition coming from Sri Lanka, from India, and the world** is crucial to us. If there is a political settlement and there is regional autonomy or self-government that is guaranteed by the Constitution, recognised by the international community, that is something I would call substantial."

The Presidential election of November 9, as expected, resulted in a landslide victory for Chandrika. She secured a 62.5 percent vote. Tamil voters themselves who identified her with the peace process, voted for her in large numbers. Except in Jaffna where there was a low turn-out of 2.97 percent, other Tamil-majority electorates, particularly in the Eastern province, voted overwhelmingly for her. **But it soon became apparent that profiting by the war-weariness among the people, she had used Peace as an election plank more as electoral strategy than because of genuine commitment**. She herself virtually admitted this in the course of an exclusive two-hour interview given by her at "Temple Trees" to Senior Editor Shekhar Gupta of *India Today* the following year (IT May 15, 1995).

> **Q:** When you started the peace process, a lot of people said the Government doesn't know who it's dealing with. That it's going out on a limb. Do you think they were right?

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**A: No, because every other kind of thing that was used had not succeeded**. There is no other way possible apart from going for an all-out war against the LTTE with an army and armed which were not the best trained and not at all equipped.....

**Q:** So you had no option.

**A:** We were certainly not going to go into an all-out war. Second, even if we wanted to, we were not properly equipped. **And we thought, well, let us try something which nobody had tried till now.**

**Q:** And you thought there wasn't very much to lose anyway? If you get into discussions for a few months, and it didn't work out....?

**A:** Yes. Exactly. But the feeling was that if it doesn't work out, well, then we cannot rule out other options. But we did not say it. We can't say it. So we **thought let us tell them that for the first time there is a government that is willing to consider them as our equals .....**

That was all very careless of her, but when she gave the interview the war had resumed and there was nothing much to hide anyway.

When Chandrika took her oaths as President on 12th November , the LTTE made a gesture of goodwill by unilaterally declaring a cessation of hostilities for one week from 12th to 19th November. This was communicated to the government by the ICRC, but this was ignored by the government. President Chandrika's appointment of her uncle Col.Anuruddha Ratwatte as "Deputy Defence Minister" (really an euphemism for Minister for War!) was to prove inauspicious. Giving the excuse that the LTTE announcement was not directly communicated to the government, the armed forces continued their hostilities. What angered the LTTE most and which nearly wrecked the peace process, was a gruesome and provocative act on the part of the armed forces

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in capturing and beheading a high-ranking LTTE intelligence wing member Sinnathamby Pathmanathan ("Malli") in the Nedunkerni area. Pirabakaran sent a courteous letter on 20th November to Col.Ratwatte saying *"Our request for the return of his head, made through the ICRC, was also turned down by your forces. We kindly request you to hold an immediate investigation into this incident and inform us about the details..."* Tamilselvan had earlier, on the 18th, written to the Secretary, Defence, through the ICRC demanding that the head of "Malli" be returned immediately for decent burial and some explanation be given about the incident the same day.

The Secretary/Defence sent a reply to Tamilselvan the same day in which he stated -*"Deeply concerned to learn of this barbaric act. Have instructed Brigade Commander to inquire and report on this incident .The head, if located early, could be returned. Otherwise ashes would be returned."* Subsequently, Col.Ratwatte wrote to Pirabakaran saying that "the head referred to" was in an advanced state of decomposition and as such was duly cremated, but the ashes would be returned. While stating that a military court of inquiry would inquire into the incident and appropriate action would be taken, Col.Ratwatte concluded his letter with a strange request – ***"I consider it judicious to keep this communication confidential for the time being"*** As to what happened to the inquiry and whether any army men were punished was not known. Obviously the whole thing was a charade.

The eight months between Chandrika assuming power in November 1994 and the collapse of the peace process in April 1995 will be remembered not for any improvement in ethnic relations, but for the voluminous correspondence that she and her deputies entered into with the LTTE. No less than 46 letters were exchanged – between Pirabakaran and Chandrika, between Ratwatte and Pirabakaran and between Balapatapendi and Tamilselvan! The period also saw four rounds of talks in Jaffna that ended in nothing. While the composition of the Colombo team for the first three rounds of talks did not merit any interest, the fourth round of talks brought in some intriguing new faces. The six-member team, apart from Balapatabendi, Brigadier

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Pieris and Captain Rajaratne of the Navy who were there earlier, there was the Anglican Bishop of Colombo Rt. Rev. Kenneth Fernando, well-known University lecturer Dr.Jayadeva Uyangoda and Charles Abeysekera, chairman of the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE). While the government delegates for the first three rounds of talks made no public pronouncements about their visits to Jaffna, both Bishop Kenneth Fernando and Dr.Uyangoda made statements that were not found palatable in Colombo. Dr.Uyangoda was reported to have said that on his recent visit to Jaffna he saw what he called **a quasi-State in existence**. He went on to say: "I think no President, Prime Minister, Minister or Army General told us about this". It revealed how even a distinguished academic like Dr.Uyangoda could have missed the truth when all those people whom he mentioned had surely known it for a fact all along. Bishop Kenneth Fernando who had met Pirabakaran in the company of Church of South India Bishop Ambalavanar made hackles rise in Colombo's political and military circles by saying that he found in the LTTE leader ***"a humane person".***

The long distance correspondence could not have achieved any lasting results because both the Government and the LTTE were talking through two conflicting positions. The LTTE wanted the day-to-day problems of the Tamil people solved and normal life resumed before going on to the nuts and bolts of a political settlement. As far as the government was concerned "security concerns" were uppermost in their minds. Petrol, diesel, kerosene engine oil were banned and as a result the economic life of the Tamil people suffered. But the Government saw the ban as a means of paralysing the mobility of the Tigers. The ban on fishing deprived thousands of families of their only livelihood. But the Government thought that the movements of Sea Tigers could be curbed that way. All fertilizers containing nitrogen and urea were banned and Tamil farmers suffered enormously. But the Government thought Tigers could use them for making explosives. The ban on cement and iron made it impossible for people to restore their war-damaged homes. The Government thought these could be used by Tigers to build bunkers. The economic embargo extended to several non-military items such as printing

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paper, bicycles, spare parts of motor vehicles, tyres, as well as shoe polish, towels, shirts and trousers. These bans had no effect on the Tigers who had constant boat movements to and from South India. The civilians were the ones who suffered immensely by the economic embargo.

The beginning of 1995 however saw a break-through in the negotiation process. A formal declaration of Cessation of Hostilities was signed between Pirabakaran in Jaffna and Chandrika in Colombo on 5th January 1995. The seven-point document included the setting up of Committees to inquire into violations of the agreement, and that these Committees *"could comprise representatives drawn from Canada, Netherlands, Norway, ICRC, and from among retired Judges or Public Officers, Religious Heads and other leading citizens; all appointed by mutual agreement*". It is significant to note that next-door neighbour India was not among the countries included. The document concluded by saying *"cessation of hostilities will continue till notice of termination is given by either party. Such notice should be given at least 72 hours before termination"*. Four foreign delegates from three western nations, Norway, the Netherlands and Canada arrived to take over the responsibility of chairing these committees and on 10th January two of them were sent by the government to chair the committees in Trincomalee and Batticaloa-Amparai regions. This was done without notifying the LTTE and when Tamilselvan shot off a protest note to Balapatabendi, the Government backed down and deferred work on those committees until the LTTE met with the delegates in Jaffna.

At the third round of talks on 14th January, the LTTE protested at new restrictions imposed on fishing, as well as the refusal of the government in withdrawing the army camp at Pooneryn. The location of this camp virtually blocked free movement of people between the peninsula and the mainland. But on both issues the government refused to give way, quoting "security considerations". The LTTE also pointed out that while the embargo on certain items was relaxed by the government, the military personnel at the Vavuniya checkpoint blocked the passage of those items. These and other irritants



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continued, with the government showing increasing belligerence and the LTTE losing their patience. Charges and counter charges of violations of the agreement added to the tension.

With the government refusal to withdraw the army from Pooneryn, the peace process came to the point of getting stalled. Pirabakaran wrote to the president giving March 28 as the deadline for her to come back with a response to the LTTE demands. Unless a favourable reply was forthcoming by that date, he said he would be compelled to take a "painful decision" and also consider whether to withdraw from the peace process. At the same time the LTTE released 13 policemen and one army officer who were in their custody for four years. The release of the prisoners coinciding with the ultimatum left the government puzzled. It was decided to ignore the ultimatum anyway, and the president made plans to leave on a goodwill visit to New Delhi.

But something of a bombshell intervened. A Reuter report from New Delhi quoting some officials, dutifully carried by the Colombo newspaper, *The Island,* claimed that New Delhi would be taking up with the president the question of extraditing Pirabakaran in connection with the Rajiv Gandhi assassination. It left the president furious. Interested parties also floated rumours in Colombo that a joint Indian-Israeli operation to capture Pirabakaran was being studied in New Delhi. It was soon found that the whole thing was nothing more than political mischief and fantasy.

Meanwhile, the LTTE had extended the March 28 deadline to April 19, but such was the smugness of the government, even the extended deadline was not taken seriously. Since politicians, as a rule, never mean what they say, it did not strike the Colombo establishment that Pirabakaran was not a politician. A faxed letter from the LTTE informing the president that the LTTE was ending the agreement on cessation of hostilities at midnight reached the president at 10.30 p.m. Clearly, the government and the armed forces were caught with their pants down. When the president called on the service chiefs to keep the forces on "red alert" immediately and summoned them for an

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urgent meeting at 7 a.m. the next day, the awareness of approaching danger did not appear to have seeped in even then.

The danger came soon enough. Before the government could react to the new situation, two Chinese built fast gun boats, the *Ranasuru* and *Soorya* berthed at the Trincomalee harbour were both blown up by Black Sea Tigers. *Sunday Times* military columnist Iqbal Athas giving a detailed report in the issue of April 23, 1995 said that the 40-foot long *Ranasuru* was bought at a cost of over Rs.208.5 million and that the *Soorya* was gifted by the Chinese government in 1972.

> "As midnight approached", wrote Athas, "heavy rains continued. It was dark too. Four unidentified persons – two men and two women – wearing oxygen masks and in scuba diving gear had come swimming close to the Two Fathom jetty (the regular berthing area for gunboats) It was 12.50 a.m. In the rear (aft or quarter deck area) of Ranasuru men were asleep on their bunk beds. Some were on leave or were at an Avurudhu (Sinhala New Year) variety entertainment that was under way at the gymnasium. Those aboard on duty were monitoring the radar or were at gun positions.
>
> Then a loud explosion hit the rear of Ranasuru.. It tore the rear and flung the bodies of the sleeping sailors sky high blasting them into pieces. Those in the front quickly made their exit running across the other gun boats secured alongside So did the officers and men aboard Soorya which stood secured next to Ranasuru. Exactly twenty five minutes later at 1.15 a.m. a much louder explosion wrecked Soorya and it sank. Ranasuru remained partly submerged with its front portion pointing skywards .There was some slight damage to other gunboats. Navy men had established that 12 of their colleagues had died and 21 were injured....Elsewhere in the North,. the four Black Sea Tigers who were involved in the raid on navy vessels

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were honoured posthumously. They were Major Koi Kumaran (Paranthan), Major Kathiravan (Paranthan), Captain Madusha (Kuchchaveli) and Captain Shantha (Pungudutivu).

What was later come to be described as Eelam War III had begun, promising to be more destructive than the earlier ones. Caught on the wrong foot and under-equipped to fight another war, the only option for the government was to go on a shopping spree of weapons, planes, tanks, ships, armoured personnel carriers, helicopters and all the paraphernalia of war. Before leaving for the Paris Aid meeting, the president authorised in principle the purchase of four AN-32 aircraft, six helicopters and two large navy warships each costing US dollars 13 million, all from Russia. Also planned was the purchase of nine new Dvora fast aircraft from Israel, each at a cost of US $ 3.9 million. Representatives of various arms manufacturers were having a field-day! Hardly had the ink dried on the government's shopping list, the LTTE shot down two Avro aircraft, one after another, on the 28th and 29th April. Aboard the first Avro that crash-landed on the Palali runway were 38 Navy, Army and Air Force personnel, including the highest Air Force official in the north, Wing Commander Roger Weerasinghe. The plane which was home-bound also carried the bodies of eight army men killed in action. Fifty two persons, most of them armed forces personnel were killed in the second Avro crash.

By the beginning of May, LTTE began amassing men and material around the disputed Pooneryn army camp. Government intelligence put down the strength of the LTTE in the area at 3000, signalling a massive assault on the camp. While government attention was turned on Pooneryn, the Tigers made repeated strikes at army positions in the east. Kallarawa village in the east, near Thiriyaya, north of Trincomalee, which was one of the Sinhalese settlements under army protection came under attack on May 26. Practically all the colonists were massacred and the village itself was left in shambles. It was later found that the men in the army camp had fled and hid in the jungles leaving the helpless civilians without any protection.

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June saw a major blow for the government. On June 28 the government military base at Mandaitivu was completely wiped out by a 1000-strong force of the LTTE. At the end of a four-hour battle, 110 soldiers were found dead, and ten others were still missing or presumed dead. According to a Colombo report, the Tigers got away with the entire armoury, including two five-zero heavy machine guns, several rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), heavy 81 millimeter mortars, at least 200 automatic weapons and over 150,000 rounds of ammunition. *"This was enough weaponry to arm 250 Tigers for at least three months of operations against the forces*", commented the "Defence Correspondent" of the Colombo newspaper, *The Island*. Dubbed by the newspaper as the **"Mandaitivu Debacle: A Disaster of Inaction**", the report said questions were raised in defence circles about how the Tigers were to attack the garrison so easily after there had been prior information about the LTTE plans known to the high command. In fact most of the army men were found to have fled and run into the sea when the 2 a.m. attack began. The Palali airbase was only five minutes flying time from Mandaitivu and the Karainagar naval base was only half an hour cruising time from the island. Yet, neither the air force nor the navy had come to the rescue of the besieged soldiers.

Stung by the Mandaitivu debacle, Deputy Defence Minister Col. Anuruddha Ratwatte who had all along fancied the idea of "liberating" Jaffna, ordered Major General Rohan Daluwatte, his choice of Overall Operations Commander, to get ready with plans for a major operation. The idea seemed to be to meet a political exigency rather than winning the war through military strategy. Code-named *"Operation Leap Forward*", 10,000 ground troops, backed by armour and artillery and provided with air cover from fighter ground attack craft, helicopters and supersonic F-7s, and assisted by the Navy from the sea fanned out in two columns from Palali on the morning of July 9. It was a heavy-handed start, with much fanfare that seemed to go well with the Tigers offering little resistance. **But on the very first day of the government offensive there took place a dastardly attack by air on helpless civilians who had sought shelter on the grounds**

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**of a place of worship – the Church of St.Peter and St.Paul at Navaly. If the strategy was to bomb the areas ahead to facilitate the movement of ground troops, it proved to be a total disaster. More than 24 hours of indiscriminate bombing by the Sri Lankan Air Force made people run helter-skelter seeking refuge in temples and churches. The pilot of the low-flying aircraft could not have mistaken the hundreds of men, women and children gathered in the church grounds for LTTE militants. Nearly a hundred persons, many of them women and children were killed on the spot, while an equal number were left with injuries. The government took pains to cover up the incident with the Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar even rebuking the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for exposing the news to the outside world.**

According to a report in the issue of the *Daily News* of July 15, 1995, Kadirgamar said it was strange that the ICRC had issued the statement on the basis of "so-called eye witness accounts"! The report said: "Kadirgamar said that the ICRC had been quick to "apportion blame" to the security forces who were not in the area where the church was located. The ICRC should have been careful particularly considering the fact that the LTTE was "a ruthless organisation". **Interestingly, the same report in the *Daily News* said: "On Thursday the US State Department refused to condemn the church bombing and said that Colombo had ordered a probe into the incident".** It just showed how closely the US government had been following events in Sri Lanka, while lacking in objectivity and fair-mindedness in its approach to the problems of the Tamils.

During the first five days of the government offensive the LTTE resorted to a mobile defence of attacking and withdrawing to alternate positions; a typical guerrilla strategy. The government forces on the other hand in their anxiety to "liberate the innocent Tamil population from the grip of the LTTE", made it their priority to occupy territory which policy was to prove costly in the end. The more territory they brought under their control, the more difficult they found in consolidating their territorial gains. On Day

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Six, the Tigers launched a fierce counter attack operation code-named "Puli Paichchal" (Leap of the Tiger), penetrating the government forward defence lines and killing at least fifty soldiers and injuring over forty others. It was also reported in Colombo (*Sunday Leader*, July 16) that the LTTE had made off with two lorry loads of government weapons and equipment. **An Argentine-built Pucara bomber aircraft called in to rescue the soldiers was shot down by a Surface to Air Missile (SAM), and the pilot killed, a development that came as a shock to the government**. Whether it was the same pilot who was responsible for the Navaly bombing was not known, but to the relations of the Navaly victims, it appeared as poetic justice.

On Day Seven, government forces began pulling back from the positions they held, and "Operation Leap Forward" turned into Operation Leap Back! On the same day frogmen belonging to the Sea Tigers launched an attack on the 2628-ton naval command ship *Edithara* in Kankesanturai harbour and sank it. The entire government offensive planned by Minister Ratwatte and executed by Major General Rohan Daluwatte ended as a failure by July 18. End-July however saw the Tigers losing heavily when they launched an attack on government detachments at Weli Oya. Having cut off power supplies to the army camps the Tigers moved in under the cover of darkness, but quick action by the government forces in switching on the stand-by generators caught the Tigers by surprise. The LTTE admitted to losing sixty three of their cadres, while the government claimed the Tiger losses amounted to more than 300. On the same day however, the Tigers blew up the Land Rover vehicle of Brigadier Nalin Angammana near Valaichenai in the east killing him and wounding thirteen others, including some junior officers.

August 1995 marked the first anniversary of President Chandrika Kumaratunga's People's Alliance narrow win at the parliamentary elections. She marked the occasion by presenting a new political package to end the war. Under new constitutional reforms, it was reported, Sri Lanka would be divided into eight administrative regions that would have exclusive legislative powers and control over such key areas as land, finance, law and order. The

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country would then be known as a Union of Regions. The President was also prepared to link the northern and eastern provinces into one, all such proposals being approved by parliament and then at a national referendum. That being an unlikely prospect, it did not evoke much enthusiasm among the Tamils. While the Tamil United Liberation Front said the package represented "a significant advance on all previous political solutions" the "Sinhalese People's Liberation Front" (JVP) and the Buddhist clergy attacked the proposals calling them a sell-out that would lead to the creation of a separate Tamil state. As was to be expected the proposals were dropped.

On August 8, a Tamil suicide bomber set off explosives outside the office of the Western Province Chief Minister's office at Torrington Square in Colombo. Twenty two people were killed and more than fifty others injured. It was really an operation that went wrong by chance, the intended targets being the Deputy Defence Minister and armed forces commanders. Colombo was to see more violence with Tamils being abducted from homes and killed secretly by policemen and army men. It was reported that at least 28 Tamils were found, kidnapped, tortured and their bodies dumped in the Bolgoda lake, Diyanna Oya and on roads in the Kurunegala and Kalutara districts.

The Sri Lankan navy that had already lost two gunboats and a naval vessel earlier that year lost two more of the Israeli-built Dvora fast attack crafts on August 29. The loss was the result of a colossal blunder on the part of the navy. A ferry called Iris Moana, used to carry passengers and supplies from Trincomalee to the north was hijacked by the Tigers and was berthed at Chalai off the Mullaitivu coast. There were 136 passengers on board. On the basis of some Tiger communication intercepts, the army's military intelligence sent a warning to the navy of an LTTE ship unloading weapons. Not realising that it was a deliberate ploy by the LTTE to get the naval vessels come closer to the Iris Moana, the navy's eastern commander Commodore Daya Sandagiri sent the navy's largest warship, the Jayasagara along with two Dvora craftsto the area. Mistaking the Iris Moana for the suspect ship, and not seeing any Tiger vessels in the vicinity, one of the Dvora crafts quickly headed towards it only

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to be hit by Tiger fire. Within hours a sea battle ensued and another Dvora boat was sunk by the Tigers. Twenty five naval personnel lost their lives

After a succession of reverses in their war with the Tigers, Sri Lanka's armed forces suffered a further blow on September 13 when a newly acquired military transport plane plunged into the sea near Colombo, killing all 75 troops and crew members. The Antonov-32 which was flying to Jaffna was said to have been caught in a thunderstorm resulting in instrument failure. It was the third time in five months that a troop-carrying plane crashed with the loss of all aboard. The crash came at a time when the government was beefing up its military arsenal in preparation for the much-awaited second phase of Operation Riviresa (Operation Sunshine)) to wrest the Jaffna peninsula from the Tigers.

Operation Riviresa which was launched on October 17 as planned with the induction of 40,000 troops, was preceded by two weeks of bombing of Jaffna from the air and press censorship. As in the case of the Navaly church bombing, the air force bombed the Nagerkovil school, killing many of the school children, but denied culpability. When the UNESCO head in Paris condemned the bombing, Foreign Minister Kadirgamar took issue with the UNESCO chief and shot off a protest note to him through the Sri Lankan embassy in Paris. Military spokesman Brig. Sarath Munasinghe admitted that the air force bombed the area but it was a Tiger base that was targeted, he said, and not the school.

While thousands of troops backed by warplanes and tanks advanced on rebel positions on the first day, the Tigers offered stiff resistance destroying three armoured personnel carriers by rocket and mortar fire. Elsewhere in Trincomalee, Tiger divers blew up a navy supply ship killing seven sailors and two civilians aboard. In a second retaliation rebel commandos fought their way inside Sri Lanka's two main oil depots in the south – Kolonnawa and Orugodawatte and blew up the storage tanks. As troops and fire-fighters rushed to the scene, the Tigers cut down 23 soldiers, wounding 36 others.



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The blazing tanks of fuel shrouded the city of Colombo causing thousands of residents to flee their homes, forcing the government to appeal for help from India to put out the fires. More than $30million worth of diesel, petrol, kerosene and aviation fuel went up in flames.

After one week of the government offensive in which the death toll, according to military figures, had climbed to more than 770, Sri Lanka was placed on a "war footing". The LTTE said more than 400,000 civilians in the Jaffna peninsula have been displaced. Amidst fierce battles and in some areas hand-to-hand fighting and heavy casualties on both sides, government troops captured the key town of Neerveli. While the air force kept bombing from the air, several villages in the outskirts of Jaffna were hit by shells. One such shell hit the Jaffna hospital forcing patients to flee the wards. In their single-minded military objective of taking Jaffna, the government lost sight of the fate of civilians who could no longer suffer the heat of war. While the entire Valikamam area got depopulated, except for the old and the infirm who could not flee and the extent of civilian casualties not known, the LTTE announced that they were shifting all their offices from Jaffna town to the Thenmarachchi area of the peninsula. The LTTE statement said that humanitarian organisations, including international ones, operating in the Jaffna peninsula were also in the process of shifting their offices to Thenmarachchi, following the large-scale movement of the people to the area.

The military analyst of the *Sunday Times*, Colombo, wrote in the issue of the paper dated November 05:

> "Bombing from the air, strafing from helicopters, shelling from the sea and artillery from the camps have left an impression that the Sri Lankan troops are evil in the minds of the peninsular residents. In a way, the Tamil people were driven to extremism, or isolated from the democratic mainstream by short-sighted political and military leaders. This must be reversed".

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A Reuter report in the *International Herald Tribune* of November 1, 1995 said:

> "The Tamil Tiger stronghold of Jaffna city in northern Sri Lanka was almost deserted Tuesday after guerrillas and thousands of civilians fled before advancing government troops, aid workers and army sources said. The exodus, which began after troops overran the town of Neerveli, on the approach to Jaffna, marked a turning point in the army's campaign to recapture the Jaffna peninsula, where the rebels run a virtual mini-state, army sources said."
>
> "More than 100,000 guerrillas and civilians have fled the city. A senior Western relief worker said: If this goes on much longer Jaffna will be a ghost town. The worker quoting colleagues in Jaffna, said that the Jaffna teaching hospital, reported earlier to be overflowing with rebel wounded, had been evacuated of those who could walk, and that the area around the hospital was almost empty".

On November 4, the Sri Lankan government accused the LTTE of contriving the exodus of people from the peninsula as hundreds of thousands of refugees fled to the mainland. About 250 boats, each carrying about 250 passengers, were making four crossings daily through the Kilali lagoon to bring the refugees to the Kilinochchi district, reports said. Refugees were also arriving in large numbers at Mullaitivu and Mannar. **Meanwhile UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali called on all concerned to facilitate relief assistance to the affected population by humanitarian organisations, spokesman Juan Carlos Brandt said in New York. "Reports of massive displacement of the civilian population in northern Sri Lanka are a source of deep concern to the Secretary General," he said and added the United Nations was following the situation closely. While Tamil politicians welcomed the UN concern, Sri Lanka's abrasive**

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**Foreign Minister Kadirgamar who had already crossed swords with the ICRC and UNESCO on the issue of humanitarian concerns, took on the UN secretary General saying Mr.Boutros Boutros Ghali's appeal for aid to those fleeing the war "was not made in the full knowledge of the facts". "*We do not intend to permit any outside agencies including the United Nations itself to carry out independent operations*", *he said at a news conference in Colombo.***

Earlier, Western relief agencies had accused the military of blocking desperately needed aid to the war refugees. Paul Watson, reporting to the *Toronto Star* of November 5, said tight restrictions are preventing the delivery of drugs, tents, and blankets as well as equipment to build latrines quoting frustrated aid officials who spoke on condition they were not named. Sri Lanka's military won't let journalists cross into areas controlled by the LTTE. *"Relief workers are so afraid of making the government angry, they refuse to photograph or shoot video of the refugees' suffering and smuggle the pictures out to reporters,"* the report said.

While government troops were closing in on Jaffna city, there were other incidents elsewhere. In an abortive attempt to infiltrate into the Army Headquarters in Colombo, two Tiger suicide cadres blew themselves up on November 11, killing twenty people and injuring more than sixty. On November 19, the Tigers shot down a Chinese-built Y-8 transport plane over the sea before it could land at Palaly airbase. That was the fourth aircraft lost by the government in the course of the year. In the east, at Valaichchenai, at least 38 soldiers were killed and 24 others wounded in an attack by the LTTE. Fifty guerrillas were also killed in the 2-hour battle, it was reported. In the battle for Jaffna, the Tigers lost the leader of the women's guerrilla wing, known by her *nom de guerre* Akila, who was wanted in connection with the Rajiv Gandhi murder,." Lt.Col.Akila attained martyrdom in the defence of Jaffna", said a statement faxed from the LTTE office in London.

In Colombo, the Inspector General of Police W.B.Rajaguru announced a

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five-fold increase in the reward for information leading to the capture or arrest of LTTE leader Velupillai Pirabakaran. The reward of Rs.25 million could be paid in any country in any currency the informer wishes, he announced. A few days later Mr.Pirabakaran went on the rebel radio, heard in government-controlled Vavuniya. He said: "In the war for occupation the enemy has invaded our land in gigantic proportions as never before. They may hoist the flag. But as long as the Sri Lankan armed forces occupy Jaffna, the door to peace talks will always remain tightly shut". "The war for Jaffna is only a temporary set back. From this set back, we will reach victory", he added.

The government's Lion flag was hoisted by the Deputy Defence Minister over the ancient Dutch fort that was the army's headquarters before it pulled out of the town. But the people whom the government wanted to "liberate" and govern were nowhere to be found. Shockingly enough, the government's *Operation Sunshine* ended with the biggest humanitarian crisis in the island's "2500-year history". While many Sinhalese in the south were indulging in euphoria over the fall of Jaffna, nearly half a million Tamils, men, women and children were braving the monsoon rains and crossing over to the south of the peninsula and the Vanni mainland, many of them with only the clothes they wore. It reminded one in miniature of the huge displacement of people during the partition of India. But where they were heading was no eldorado. It was parched territory, semi-jungle and marshland. Kilinochchi to where most people trekked was a small town ill-equipped to handle the influx. Exposed to the elements, with no houses to move in, many families were forced to find shelter under trees.

"*The night of Monday, October 30, 1995, was a black night in the entire history of the age-old city of Jaffna",* wrote Rev.Dr.S.J.Emmanuel, that eminent Catholic priest who had consistently identified himself with the sufferings of the Tamil people.

> "Never has history witnessed such an exodus of fear and panic-stricken people screaming and squeezing themselves out

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of the narrow roads and lanes of Jaffna. The nearly half a million population in and around the Town was literally on the roads in pouring rain inching its way out of the densely populated town into the sparsely populated and ill-equipped suburban towns and villages of Chavakachcheri, Kodikamam and Palai. It was for everyone a fight for survival.... With the coalescing of all the previous waves of displacements, the historic exodus from Jaffna, fleeing the threat of the Sri Lankan army atrocities during that fateful night of October 30, 1995, alone reached an unbelievable 300,000 civilians.... The world has neither known the whole truth of this exodus and massive suffering nor has any Government condemned the action of the Sri Lankan Government for its military action..."

What did the Government achieve through its military pursuit of "liberating" Jaffna? The last word on that came not from the Tamils, but from a Sinhalese, retired Air Force Commander Harry Goonetilleke in an interview with the *Sunday Leader,* Colombo, in its issue of April 14, 1996. When asked by the interviewer about Deputy Defence Minister Gen.Ratwatte's (from Colonel he was promoted General after he unfurled the Lion flag in Jaffna) claim that the war would be brought to an end by the Sinhala and Tamil New Year, Harry Goonetilleke said:

**"I don't want to mince my words. With my thirty years experience as a military man, I would say this is one of the stupidest statements made in parliament... I think on the whole Operation Riviresa was a disaster**....except for denting the LTTE's ego, nothing else has happened to the LTTE. Their cadres are intact, their weapons are intact, the money is pouring. In fact, recruitment has become easier for the LTTE because of the capturing of Jaffna that the Tamils regard as their real home. Also, this operation has created half a million refugees and now the Government has to look after them. So, politically it has been

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a disaster. Militarily too, I see this as a disaster. As (General) Denzil Kobbekaduwa himself told me when he was alive, with whom I agree although the situation has gone a bit further now with the LTTE becoming more powerful, he was not interested in real estate but wanted to weaken the LTTE and bring them to the negotiating table. Nothing like this has happened before this. Now the Jaffna peninsula consists of 960 sq. kilometres and Operation Riviresa captured 260 sq. kilometres. But how many soldiers do you need to guard this territory? Also, the LTTE was clever enough to get the people leave the captured areas and now, according to what I hear, there are more soldiers and Government servants in Jaffna than people…

**"According to statistics compiled, 2,026 service personnel had been killed in action in 1995 alone in the North and East, while in comparison for the entire eleven-and-a-half year period from July 1983 to 1994, approximately 3,294 had been killed. So 1995 has been the most expensive period of the war. Also the majority of the ships and the aircraft were lost in 1995. The loss is in billions and billions of rupees Therefore the war has been more expensive in terms of lives and military hardware during 1995 alone than for the whole of the eleven and a half year period of the war."**

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*The author as head of the Tamil Information Centre, Madras, 1983-87 pictured with the staff.*

*Eelam Tamils in Adayar, Madras, protest at the deportation orders on Balasingam, Satyendra and Chandrahasan 1985.*

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*The author (left) in a police jeep with Dr.T.W. Jayakularajah and Kovai Mahesan on their way to submit a protest memorandum to the governor, against the deportation order.*

*At a Bangalore 2-day seminar on the Sri Lankan Tamil's issue organised by Centre for peace & Justice, India. Some of us Sri Lankan participants pictured with Swami Agnivesh, a Human Rights champion.*

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*Group photo of the Bangalore Seminar participants. Squatting in the centre, in white, is the late Professor Urmila Phadnis of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Mrs.Phadnis was a guest of the author at Nallur during his Saturday Review days.*

*A section of the invitees at the launch of the fortnightly Tamil Nation Madras 1990.*

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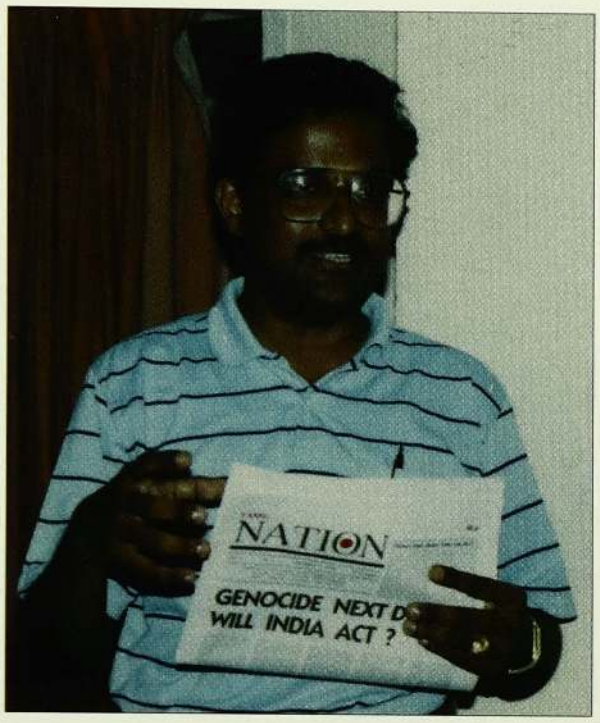

*Dr. Benjamin Raj (left) and professor U.Munusamy, two of the Indian activists in the Tamil cause speaking at the launch of Tamil Nation.*

*Speaking at the Madras University organised seminar,* ***on "Sri Lankan crisis and India's responses"****, March 1991.*

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*Some of the participants at the Madras university seminar. On far right is N.Ram of the Hindu. R.Sampanthan was the only other Sri Lankan Participant.*

*One-time Indian Foreign Secretary K.P.S.Menon chairs the seminar.*

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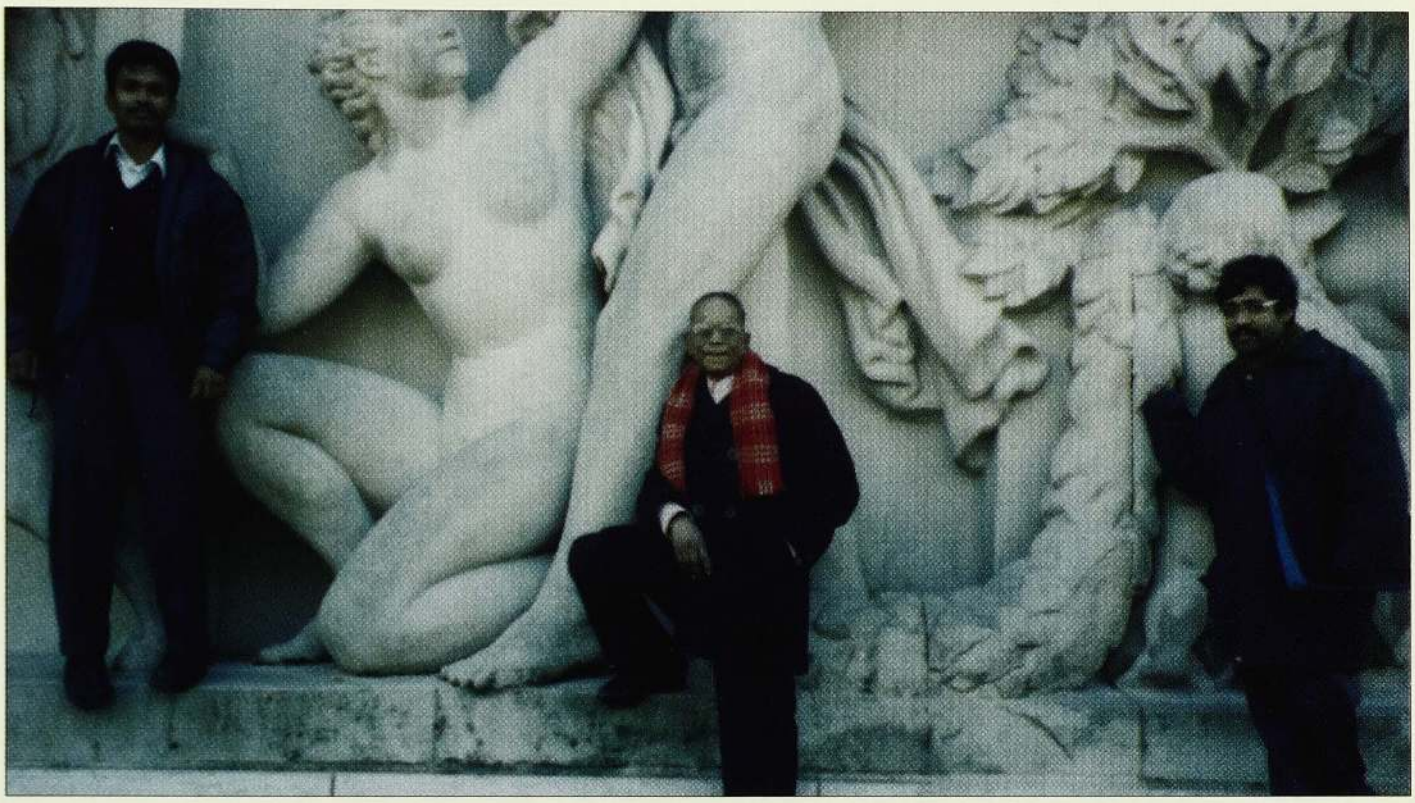
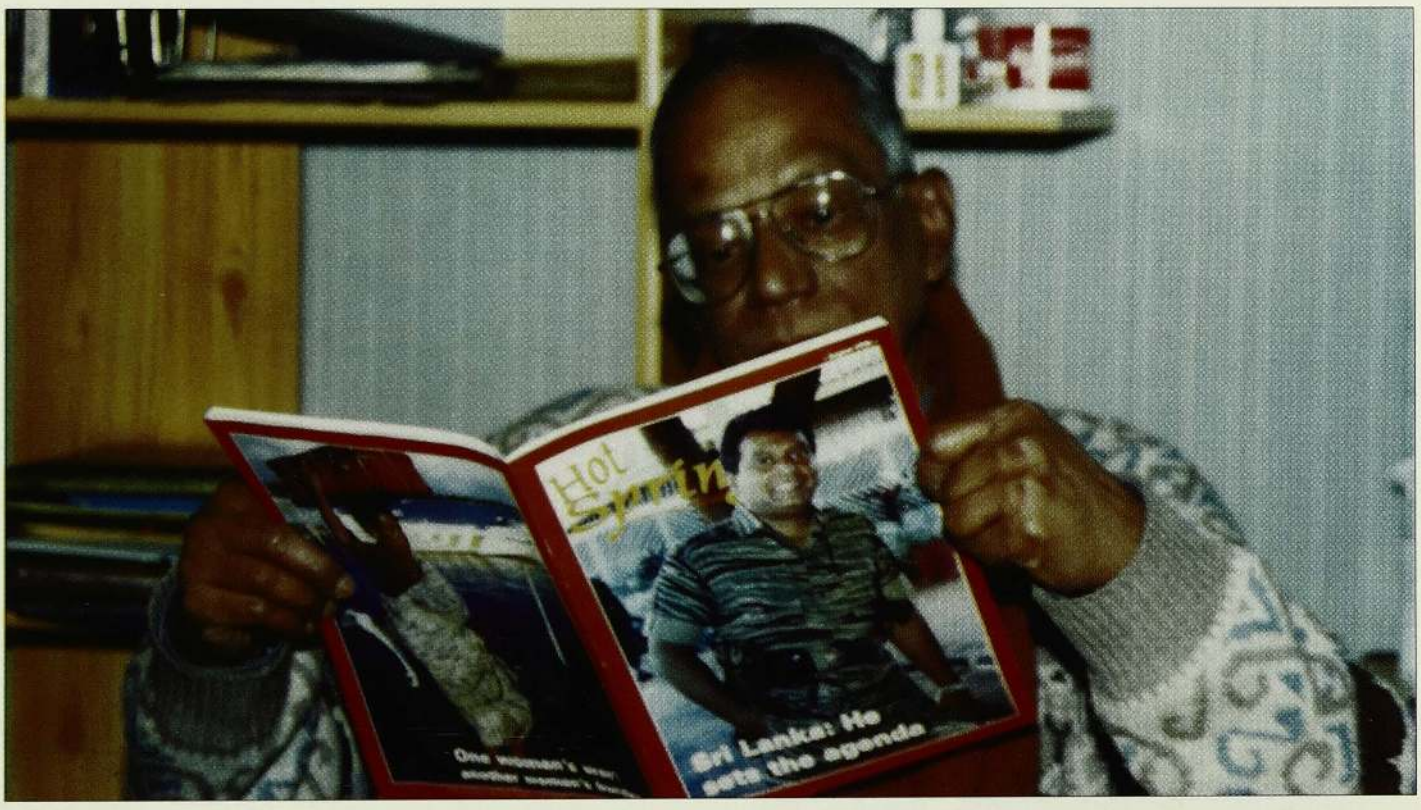


*With two young friends in Paris 1994.*




*Scanning an early issue of "Hot Spring" edited by me in Paris.*

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*With Tamil nationalist leader P.Nedumaran soon after my by-pass surgery in Paris, 1996.*

*Hoisting the French flag (left) at the inauguration of a Tamil Sports Festival in France 1997.*

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*Hoisting the flag at the Edinburgh Tamil rally October 1997. 600 Eelam Tamils travelled by a special train for the rally.*

*With Eelam Tamil activist in Sydney, Australia, Ana Pararajasingham (right) at a Human Rights Seminar in London. 1997*

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*As chief guest at the Veena arangetram of Sharmini Rajagopal.*

*Kumar Ponnambalam in a jovial mood when he called on me with his wife Yogi at the "Hot Spring" office in London, 1998.*

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*Hot Spring family Get-Together and Dinner, London, June 5, 1999*

*Nadesan Satyendra speaks at the Hot Spring Dinner.*
*On the right is Dr. Sampath Kumar, one of the organisers of the Dinner.*

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*At the Hot Spring dinner, the author flanked on the left by Adrian Wijemanne and on the right by Vasantha Raja.*

*R.Ganeshalingam chief organiser of the function presenting me with a silver plaque, honouring my services to the Tamil cause.*

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*Honoured at the annual "Muthamil Vizha" conducted by Sivayogam, Tooting Amman Temple hall, London 2000. Seated on right is the late K.Vaikunthavasan.*

*The late pioneer Tamil broadcaster S.Sivapathasundram, Solicitor Sriskandarajah and Tamil journalist "Mali" are also seen at the function.*

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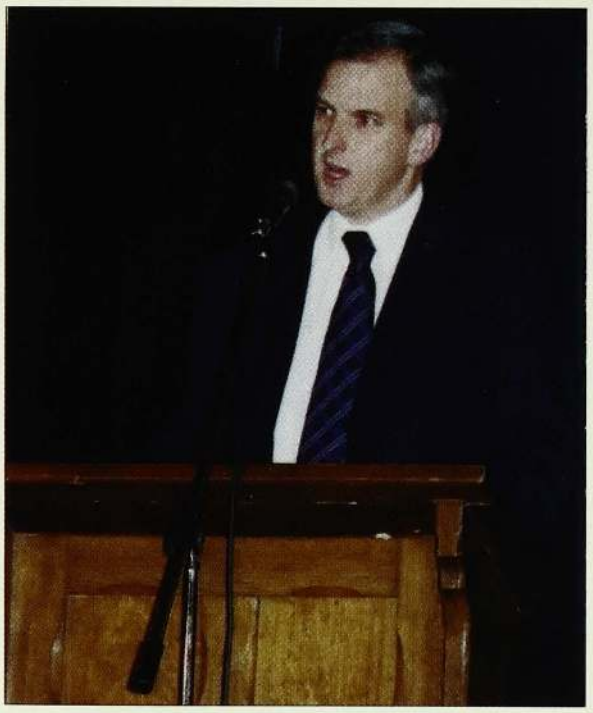
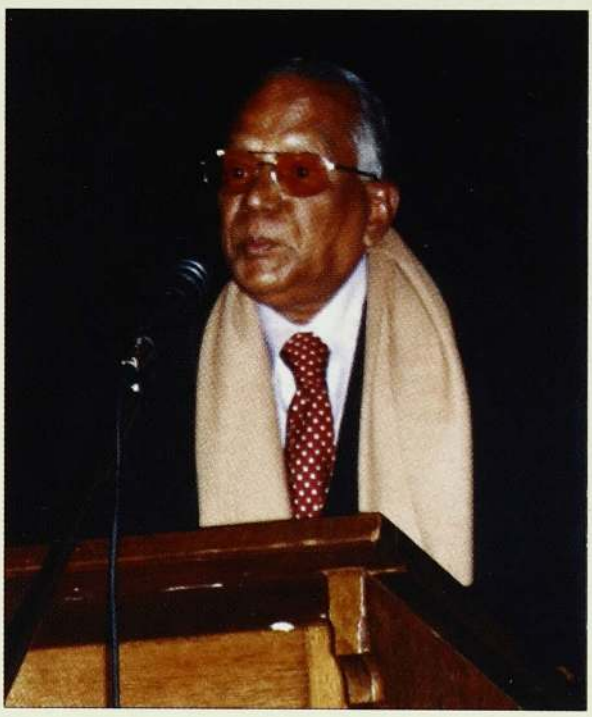
*At the launch of my book, The Pen and the Gun, in London 2002.*
*Barry Gardiner, M.P (second from right) chaired the function.*
*My wife and daughter who were later invited to the stage are also in the picture.*



*Mr.Robert Evans, member of European Parliament speaks at the book launch.*



*Saying Thank You at the book launch function.*

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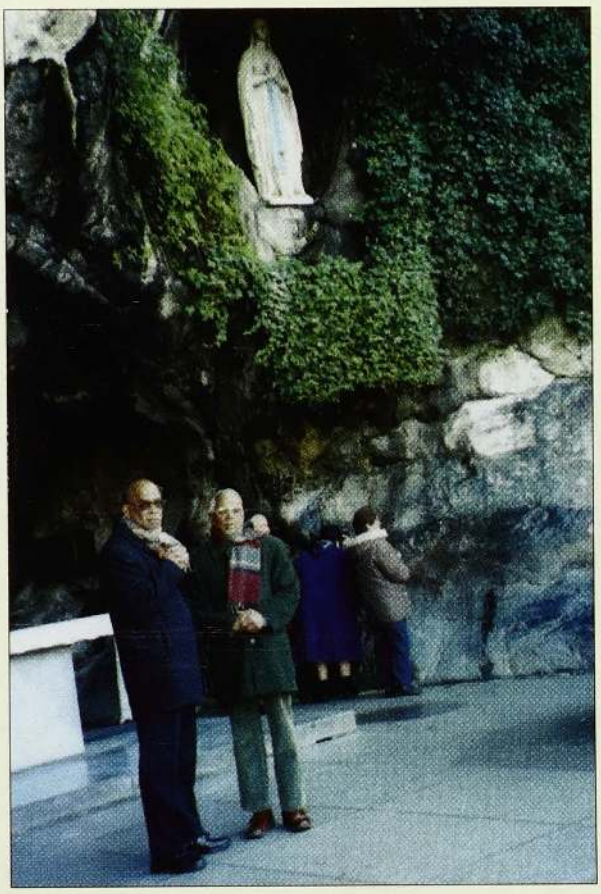

*With N.Seevaratnam at Lourdes, 2003*

*With Kirupakaran, (left) General Secretary, Tamil Centre for Human Rights and American attorney Rudrakumaran in Paris 2003.*

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*On a visit to Shakespeare's birthplace at Stratford-on-Avon.*

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*With (from left) Dr.Brian Senewiratne, C.J.T. Thamotheram and Adrian Wijemanne at Adrian's house in Cambridge.*

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# Chapter 30

## 1996: Central Bank bombed: In the north, Tigers overrun army camp.

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# 1996: Central Bank bombed: In the north, Tigers overrun army camp.

Sri Lanka's capital city of Colombo had never seen a blacker day than January 31, 1996. Hardly did the southern euphoria over the armed forces' capture of Jaffna die down, when the LTTE brought the epicentre of the war from distant Jaffna into the heart of Colombo. A huge lorry bomb ripped apart the city's financial hub gutting eight buildings including the Central Bank. At least 73 persons were killed and more than 1,500 injured. Later reports said the death toll had risen to 86.

The Colombo newspaper, *The Island*, (February 1) reported :

> "The LTTE terrorists who blasted the Central bank entrance yesterday had come in a truck, van and three-wheeler carrying light anti-tank weapons and automatics, a senior military officer told 'The Island' yesterday. A top security officer of the Central Bank also confirmed that some of his security personnel who had survived the blast had said six to eight terrorists alighted from these vehicles and fired before the truck exploded Some of the terrorists had managed to enter the building firing while the truck laden with explosives made an attempt to ram the building to blast the building from under. But the barriers at the entrance had thwarted the attempt and the truck had exploded at the entrance, devastating all the buildings in the proximity. ..."The Central Bank vault, holding the country's cash and gold reserves is intact and safe, a senior Central Bank security official announced last night...."

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It was obvious that the real target of the attack was the Central Bank vault. Had the steel barriers at the entrance given way, the consequences would have been even more terrible. The destruction of the underground vault with its gold reserves could have crippled the country economically.

The bombing made world-wide headlines. *The Guardian*, London ran an 8-column photograph and a headline on Page-1 that said- "TIGER MASSACRE IN COLOMBO." The *Daily Telegraph*, London, ran a 7-column photograph under the headline – "BEATEN BUT UNBOWED, THE TIGERS LASH BACK". "BLOOD-LETTING IN SRI LANKA," said the *New York Times* editorial headline. "VICTORY IN JAFFNA PROVES HOLLOW AS WAR IS WIDENED", said Christopher Thomas in *The Times,* London. As was to be expected, many western governments and media, both local and foreign, condemned the destruction. Colombo's *The Island,* under the editorial headline – "Prabhakaran's black magic" lamented : - "*Velupillai Prabhakaran does indeed possess some black magic. Everyone is against him but no one is prepared to move against him except the government in power whatever it be – which he takes on".*

Kenneth J.Cooper reporting for the *Washington Post Service of the International Herald Tribune* of February 1 wrote:-

> "....Two Central Bank employees who work on the 3rd floor of a 15-story building across the street from the blast site said they came to the window after hearing gunshots and saw two men wearing sarongs fire rifles at the bank, causing bystanders to drop to the street. The two employees watched a suicide bomber rapidly shift gears for four or five minutes in a determined effort to plow a truck through a security barricade in front of the bank. "He had some problems entering the building", said A.R.A.. Mihindakulasuriya , the bank's deputy director of development finance."He was just jerking and jerking trying to get in". State-run radio reported that more than 800 Central Bank employees

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were at work in the triple towers of the building and that 2,000 workers of various concerns were in the Ceylinco building.... Glass was blown off two clock faces of one of Colombo's best-known landmarks, the Lighthouse Clock Tower built in 1857. Many government offices and private businesses closed after the explosion, sending workers streaming into the streets and onto commuters trains and buses for an early journey home. Already jumpy residents of the tense capital grew even edgier. One group of angry young men surrounded and assaulted a reporter and photographer from the United States after the pair had surveyed the blast site and interviewed witnesses. The men were reacting to a false rumour that the American had videotaped the area before and after the explosion".

Tim McGirk reporting for *The Independent*, London, said –

"....Eyewitness accounts differed, but it appeared that a lorry carrying explosives managed to slip through the dozens of army checkpoints on roads leading into the Sri Lankan capital. Despite tight security, the capital has been rocked nearly 15 times by suicide bombers - the preferred weapon of the Tamil Tigers - in 12 years of ethnic war with the Sinhalese majority.....The façade of the nine-storey building was blasted open . Smoke poured from fires in nearby buildings and glass rained in a deadly shower from 34-storey skyscrapers. Cars were somersaulted by the blast and burst into flames. What had been a busy, normal street a few seconds before was transformed into a devastated landscape. Dazed and bloodied survivors hobbled through a wreckage of mangled bodies, fire, glass shards and twisted metal....The bomb may prompt the Australian cricket team to pull out of their World Cup match in Colombo on 17 February against Sri Lanka. But Sri Lankan officials said the match would go ahead as planned"

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The Liberation Tigers also said that the Australian and West Indian cricketers who were scheduled to play in Sri Lanka had nothing to fear from them. The Paris-based politiburo member of the LTTE Lawrence Thilakar told the India Abroad News Service (IANS) "We have nothing against any foreigners and they have nothing to fear from us. Our targets are the Sri Lankan government and their military".

Said Christopher Thomas for *The Times*, London (Feb.1)

> The Sri Lankan government's strategy of bringing peace through war was wrecked by yesterday's bomb. The Tamil Tigers have demonstrated that they cannot be defeated militarily or humbled politically. ...The net result of Mrs.Kumaratunga's failed policy is clear. The Sinhalese-Tamil divide has widened because of the displacement of 350,000 Jaffna Tamils who are jammed into refugee camps or forced to live with friends and families. They are jobless, homeless, poor and angry. They blame their plight on a Sinhalese President who offered hope then wrecked their lives. The capture of Jaffna city has been so calamitous that the Government refuses to allow reporters for the international press to go there. That is because the cameras would reveal what the Government controls : empty streets and houses, schools without teachers or children, hospitals without patients, fields without farmers. The Government banked on the Tamils returning home, but it was a miscalculation and Jaffna remains a ghost town. Tamil political parties that are co-operating with Mrs.Kumaratunga's strategy have not just been marginalized by their association with a failed policy; they are now all but irrelevant. Only the Tamil Tigers can speak for the Tamil community, which remains substantially under the rebels' control in spite of the loss of Jaffna"

A statement issued by an organization that styles itself – Ellalan Force

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(believed to be a front for the LTTE) claiming responsibility for the attack sneered at western critics by saying –The Sri Lankan government justifies the killing of hundreds of Tamil people in churches and children in school (in an obvious reference to the aerial bombing at the Navaly church and the Nagerkoil school). ***"Those who failed to condemn civilian massacres carried out by the government in Tamil areas do not have the moral right to condemn the Central Bank attack in Colombo."***

Nine days before the Central Bank blast, the Government had faced another humiliation. On the 22nd January, a Russian built giant transport helicopter carrying 39 armed forces personnel was shot down by the Tigers east of Point Pedro off the northern coast. All 39 including seven officers were believed to have perished, although there was speculation that some of the survivors might have fallen into LTTE hands. Nineteen bodies were found washed ashore later. Although the Air Force had lost five transport aircraft since resumption of hostilities in April the previous year, this was the first devastating attack on a M-17 helicopter. It would be remembered that two Antonovs were lost on September 13 and November 22 the previous year, besides a Pucara fighter plane. In the first crash 75 personnel were killed when their plane plunged into the sea north of Colombo harbour. The second one crashed approximately to the north of Karainagar in the north. A total of 138 armed forces personnel including officers had been killed in the two Antonov disasters.

Before the month ended, government forces were also losing ground in the eastern war sector. Nineteen military personnel including two officers were killed in two separate clashes with the Tigers in Nilaveli and Weli Oya. The Tiger casualties were reported to be minimal.

After their tactical withdrawal from Jaffna, the LTTE lost no time in creating the infrastructure for running their own administration in the Vanni. The Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) was made responsible for channelling the distribution of food and organizing other relief measures.

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While Kilinochchi was earmarked as the administrative and commercial centre, Mankulam, south of Kilinochchi was chosen to house a military complex. Mankulam was strategically situated, being the axis to Oddichutan in the west and northeastwards to Mullaitivu, the naval centre. South of Mankulam lay Omanthai, which was the gateway to LTTE-held territory. Because of its thick forest cover, Mankulam also provided safety from aerial detection.

**A Tiger aircraft?** While the government was keeping a close tab on the developments in the Vanni, the "Defence Correspondent" of the *Sunday Island* (January 7) came out with a report that a mystery aircraft had been seen flying over Kilinochchi in mid-September the previous year, but the news was suppressed by the government at that time. According to his story, which sounded credible enough, a pilot of an Air Force helicopter flying on a routine mission above the Elephant Pass army camp sometime in mid-September saw in the far distance a small plane flying low over LTTE-held territory. The helicopter crew identified the plane as a single-engined ultralight aircraft which definitely ruled out it belonging to the air force. The possibilities of it being either a private plane or an Indian one straying into the area were also ruled out. Soldiers at the army camp at Pooneryn had also independently informed the authorities of sighting the plane which came towards them but changed direction and had disappeared. The "Defence Correspondent" said: "For the first time in Sri Lanka's long civil war, it was the first solid proof that the LTTE has acquired aircraft.

There was an interesting background to this, according to the correspondent;

> "...On October 29, soldiers of Operation Riviresa, on their long, hard road to Jaffna town, battled through ferocious LTTE defences to take the town of Neerveli. What they found there shocked them. The LTTE had secretly turned Neerveli, which the army had not come near since 1990, into one of its main

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> bases, with a hospital, quarters for hundreds of cadres, and surprise, surprise, a flying training school.. Neerveli did not have an airfield or any planes. But what it did have were classrooms which looked like they had been used to teach young pilots how to fly, mechanical workshops, where it was obvious that LTTE aviation engineers had trained, and a flying training simulator made of an old aircraft cock-pit".

One of the consequences of the Central Bank bombing was the hatred turned against all Tamil civilians in Colombo, not by the mobs as in earlier instances, but by the government armed forces. Stung by their failure to prevent the audacious act of the Tigers, they turned their fury against innocent Tamils. Random arrests were carried out in areas where Tamils lived in large numbers. They were hurled into special buses and vans once they are identified as Tamils and taken to police stations and held indefinitely. Advantage was taken of the emergency and Prevention of Terrorism laws which permitted anyone to be taken into custody on mere suspicion alone. The "presumption of guilt" merely arising from a person being Tamil or having an identity card with a Jaffna birthplace led to widespread harassments.

In the East, things were much worse. There was a spate of incidents on February 11 and on the 14th, both at land and sea. Government soldiers who lost two of their men in a confrontation with the Tigers in the evening of the 11th went later under cover of night to the nearby Tamil village of Kumarapuram, Kiliveddy in the Trincomalee district, and called out to the people to come out of their huts. When no one obeyed the summons, they walked into the village, pulled out men, women and children and shot or hacked them to death. As screams of fear and pain filled the air, the soldiers continued to swipe at villagers trying to flee for their lives with scythes and other deadly weapons. Twenty four innocent farm labourers, and their wives and children lay dead and twenty eight other injured were later admitted to Trinco base hospital at the initiative of the M.P. Mr.A.Thangathurai. Brigadier P.Kulatunga who visited the scene of horror was quoted as saying;

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*"I am shocked at this brutal act, and am afraid now of the reprisal it may cause". (Sunday Leader,* Feb.18*).*

Over the next three days there was high drama at sea off the eastern coast in which the Indian navy was a direct participant. An LTTE ship named *Horizon*, suspected of carrying arms was tracked and intercepted by the Indian navy on the high seas off the Mullaitivu coast and was sunk .The *Times of India* of February 18, reported that an Indian Navy flotilla comprising three vessels were reportedly involved in the operation. The flotilla included a Leander class frigate, a missile corvette (*INS Kippan*) and a seaward defence boat (SDB 57). The SDB was damaged during a cross fire between the LTTE ship and the Sri Lankan Navy and had since returned to harbour in Madras. The daily quoted sources in the Visakapatnam-based Eastern Naval command as claiming that on February 11, they had received specific intelligence from Sri Lankan authorities. It was routed to them from New Delhi. The flotilla set sail on the morning of February 12 from Madras and subsequently located the LTTE ship on the evening of February 13. The sources said the Indian flotilla "escorted the Tiger ship located within the Sri Lankan exclusive economic zone into the Sri Lankan waters on the morning of February 14, and handed it over to the Sri Lankan navy". One wonders about the veracity of this account, considering the fact that both the Indian and Sri Lankan Defence Ministries had earlier categorically denied that the Indian Navy had any "association or involvement" in the destruction of the *Horizon*. The *Horizon* was the third LTTE vessel to be tracked and intercepted by the Indian Navy, following the interception of the trawler *Tongonova* and the destruction of *Ahat* with Kittu and his men on board.

In March, as the government prepared to launch Operation Riviresa II in the north, the LTTE launched fresh offensives in the east, resulting in heavy losses among government troops. A wave of attacks that began on March 11 had within the two weeks of the month killed 133 government personnel, including 23 Special Task Force (STF) policemen, and destroyed three small fibre glass boats. A senior military spokesman was quoted by the Colombo

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paper, *The Island*, (26 March) as saying that the Tigers had also seized a large amount of arms, ammunition and communication equipment. On April 8, Mrs. Kumaratunga's government re-imposed the nation-wide state of emergency and censorship in preparation for a crack-down in Jaffna, while thousands of Tamils there joined hands to protest the imminent army campaign expected after the Sinhalese and Tamil New Year. As the government began shelling civilian areas in both Vadamarachchi and Thenmarachchi, in the north, the Tigers made a daring attack on the Colombo harbour. In a statement from London, the LTTE said their suicide bombers had destroyed three naval gunboats and three supply ships by setting off explosives and that nine of their cadres had been killed in the process. While the government refuted the claim, the LTTE accused the government of trying to censor the news "due to the Strategic and economic importance of the Colombo harbour". (AP news. *IHR,* April 15). There was no way of verifying the rival claims, because members of the independent media were not permitted entry into the harbour until six hours later.

In an effort to secure control of territory in the Jaffna peninsula, combined air, sea and land forces launched Operation Riviresa II on April 19. The urge to control Jaffna was to prove counterproductive, both militarily and politically. While the LTTE were not foolhardy enough to offer serious resistance and incur losses of life, they took the war into the East instead, while at the same time targeting Colombo. At least ten army camps in the east were closed and the troops from there were moved to assist operations in the north, thus paving the way for the Tigers to take control there. Sinhalese civilian settlements in the "border villages" that were set up with army and police protection came under increasing attack from the Tigers forcing thousands of settlers to seek safety elsewhere. The policy of bombing and pounding civilian areas to pave the way for advancing troops in the north and forcing the people to flee was certainly not going to help the government either, if the intention was to win the hearts and minds of the people. In effect, government policy helped neither in weakening the Tigers nor offering settled lives either to the Sinhalese or to the Tamil civilians. With the end of Riviresa II, however,

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the half a million people who had fled Jaffna during Riviresa I began to drift back. Having lived under huts and intolerable conditions for six months, they wanted to get back to their villages and homes. It was a reverse Exodus II! On May 15, government forces began mopping up other areas and capturing Point Pedro and Valvettiturai in a brief offensive code-named Operation III, claiming that the entire Jaffna peninsula had come under government control. The capturing of Valvettiturai, the birth place of the LTTE leader was cause for great satisfaction for the army, many of the soldiers showing great anxiety to view the house where Pirabakaran lived, as if it was a museum piece! A photograph of the house was also published in Colombo newspapers.

The claim that the peninsula was now under government control was true enough, but life in Jaffna was far from normal. The economy was non-existent. There has been no electricity for six years. *"Despite all the hoopla in the government media about how the Jaffna people are being taken care of, visiting journalists from Colombo found that few in the rest of the country, especially Colombo, seem to have understood the sheer magnitude of the task of taking care of and rebuilding the lives of more than 400,000 people"*, wrote a Colombo journalist. There were no building materials to rebuild their homes. Schools were reopened, but few children went for classes; they were busy helping their parents to find food or standing in queues. Water supply, drainage, and roads were in a terrible state. Neither were the Tigers totally absent from the peninsula. On the 4th July, the Jaffna town sector commander Brigadier Hamangoda was killed by a woman suicide bomber. Twenty five others, including Lanka Cement Chairman Ranjith Godamuduna, and retired Superintendent of police Carlyle Dias died in the explosion. Housing Construction and Public Utilities Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva escaped with injuries. Among the dead and injured were also a few Tamil civilians who had come to watch the Minister open a branch of the Building Materials Corporation. The suicide attack was believed to mark the tenth anniversary of Black Tiger Day which was to fall the next day. On July 14, Tigers attacked the army bunkers at Sarasalai in army-occupied Jaffna and killed 13 soldiers.

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**But the worst military debacle in the government's 12-year war with the LTTE came in the week following July 17. At about 1.30 a.m. on July 18, the Tigers mounted a massive attack on the Mullaitivu army camp, overran it within 48 hours killing 1,360 soldiers, sailors and civilians working for the army. In addition, 23 soldiers, 37 elite Special Force soldiers, and 34 sailors were killed while struggling to reach the camp to rescue their comrades. That brought the total of government losses to 1,454, a staggering loss of men in one battle alone. The Defence Ministry claimed that 460 Tigers were killed, while the Tigers admitted losing 241 cadres.**

**The loss of lives apart, the LTTE took away arms and ammunition worth Rs.2.73 billion, the largest ever haul of weapons, accounting for about five percent of Sri Lanka's 1996 estimated defence budget.** Speaking at the debate in parliament when the government sought to extend the island-wide state of emergency, Dr.Jayalath Jayawardhana, the national list M.P. of the UNP, said that the LTTE's European spokesman Lawrence Thilakar had publicly thanked the Sri Lankan government for giving such a large quantity of weaponry ! The weapons listed by Dr.Jayawardhana included two 122 milimeter artillery guns, two 120 mm.heavy mortars, one recoilless rifle(RCL), fifteen 81 mm heavy mortars, thirty two 60 mm mortars, four five zero type heavy machine guns, eleven two inch mortars, fifteen multi-purpose machine guns (MPMG), one general purpose machine gun (GPMG), one hundred and eight light machine guns (LMG), one thousand six hundred and fifty four T-56 automatic rifles, two hundred and thirty eight T-81 automatic rifles, four sniper rifles, five Pakistani A-3 rifles, and twenty nine 40 mm grenade launchers.

The Mullaitivu army base was situated in the northeast sea border, occupying a large area extending across Mullaitivu town to the beach. The other nearest army bases were at Weli Oya in the south, 35 km. away and at Elephant Pass. The fall of Mullaitivu demonstrated for the first time LTTE's ability to fight and win a conventional battle as well. Reputed as a

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well-organised guerrilla force, they displayed their prowess and stamina in conventional warfare, not only in overrunning the camp, but also in holding back for several days the attempt of the government to re-establish the camp. The Sri Lanka navy itself was to sustain losses at sea in its attempt to come to the aid of the land forces. A Black Sea Tiger suicide boat rammed the gunboat *Rana Viru* and sank it, killing at least 34 sailors on the very day of action. On the 23rd, a landing craft was hit by a mortar shell, and 22 soldiers in the craft were killed and 28 others wounded. The last landing craft to ferry troops to the beached was also hit by a mortar shell, and the captain of the ship panicked and pulled away from the shore, leaving behind 14 soldiers stranded at the beach. It was presumed they were killed by the LTTE.

The truth of all what happened was never known until the censorship was lifted. On the theory that what was not revealed did not happen, General Ratwatte made a mockery of the truth in parliament saying that there were 1,407 men in the camp on the day it was attacked, that 12 were "pronounced killed in action", while the remaining 1,395 (minus those who had escaped) were listed as "missing in action"! He refused to say how many soldiers had escaped. Later it was found that there were just four men who managed to get away, trekking 40 kilometers to Weli Oya. Noting the fact that the Mullaitivu battle had put Sri Lanka's 100,000- strong army under great pressure, *The Times*, London, in an editorial comment on July 23, said: *"The £500 million military budget for this year, an enormous sum for an impoverished country, has already been exceeded by 10 percent. The political window opened by the fall of Jaffna will now almost certainly close"*. One week after *The Times* comment, the headline in the *International Herald Tribune* gave the answer. "SRI LANKA USES BREAD TO FINANCE WAR", it said. *"Sri Lanka raised bread prices Monday to increase funds for its war against Tamil rebels...President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga told the nation last week as the war entered its 14th year that some state subsidies would have to be eliminated to fund the war and warned there could be more sacrifices"*.

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In a vainglorious bid to recover lost face over the Mullaitivu debacle and to avenge the loss of the camp, the government began amassing forces for a new push into rebel territory, code-named *Sath Jaya.* .Advancing under a barrage of heavy artillery, government troops moved from Elephant Pass camp and captured Paranthan, six kilometers away. Russian-built Mi-24 helicopter gunships and ground attack aircraft were used in the attack. Government announced their real target was Kilinochchi six kilometers away. As it happened in the Jaffna offensives, the indiscriminate artillery attacks resulted in a large-scale evacuation of civilians from the area. Tigers announced that about 150,000 Tamils faced a threat of starvation. *"The magnitude of the human tragedy is grave",* they said.

A Reuters report of August 7 said:-

> "Tamil rebels reported fierce fighting Wednesday with Sri Lankan troops in a battle for a key guerrilla-held northern town (Kilinochchi) and said 200,000 homeless civilians were desperately in need of food and water. Diplomats said the government troops, backed by armor, artillery and air cover, had apparently failed to breach the defences of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam on Tuesday after at least two attempts. ....Diplomats said troops were expected eventually to take Kilinochchi , but there was uncertainty over what tangible gains could be achieved. "The troops are getting stretched, the people are fleeing into other LTTE-held areas, so what's the gain", asked one diplomat. "At the moment, it seems the army is helping the Tigers unwittingly". There were questions about the army's reluctance to allow food into the northern Tiger-held areas, diplomats said"

Kilinochchi is now a dead town, said Wilson Gnanadass , reporting for the *Sunday Leader* on October 27, after the armed forces captured it. "*So is Paranthan. Both are as silent as the grave. No evidence of human existence*



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*was to be seen save for the tough-looking soldiers with their arms. ...A number of churches, kovils and temples have been reduced to rubble..."*

**Schoolgirl raped by 11 men in uniform.** While the government offensive in the Vanni made over 15,000 Tamil civilians uprooted from their homes and made them forced refugees in "transit camps" in Vavuniya, a horrifying incident took place in Jaffna that should have moved the conscience of the government, the army top brass and the Sinhalese-owned Colombo media – but alas, it did not. Krishanthi Kumaraswamy was a 19-year old A-Level student of a leading school in Jaffna, the Chundikuli Girls' College. A brilliant student, she had obtained eight distinction passes at the G.C.E (O/L) exam. On September 07, she left home to sit the G.C.E (A/L) exam at her school. She had told her mother Rasammah, a widow, that after sitting the paper, she would be going to the funeral home of her school mate who days earlier had been run over and killed by an army truck. The girl was last seen near Kaithady army check-point at 11.30 a.m. But she never made it home. What happened to her? It took 40 days for the truth of what happened to come out.

Krishanthi was gang-raped by eleven soldiers on that fateful afternoon. It came out later, as told by a soldier, that they continued to torment her even after she made signs pleading for water. That was not all the gruesome story. Her mother, worried about her long absence, her younger brother Pranavan and a kindly neighbour Kirupamoorthy who volunteered to go with them, set out in search of Krishanthi. They never returned home either. All four of them were apparently tortured and murdered, either by strangling or by other means.

It is no credit to the Colombo Press, with the exception of the Tamil-owned *Weekend Express*, that it kept mostly silent on that dastardly crime. Krishanthi's sister, Prashanthi who was then living in Colombo, Rasammah's brother Navaratnam, Postmaster Kodeeswaran, a close relative, spent over a month making frantic inquiries about the fate of that family. Krishanthi's



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uncle Navaratnam told Pearl Thevanayagam of the *Weekend Express* (October 26-27):

> "We spent over a month contacting anyone who would assist us, tell us what happened to my family. Even Brigadier Lal Weerasooriya told us until the last minute that his soldiers knew nothing of the disappearance. We wrote to Gen. Anuruddha Ratwatte, the President, and politicians, and the answer was simple silence. No inquiries were made since any inquiries would have compelled the commander to act against the guilty soldiers. There was not a single officer who dared to probe the incident. Was my niece a terrorist ? Where is respect for a school uniform?" ...

Not until October 10, did Prashanthi get the bombshell that her entire family was now dead; that she was now alone in the world and that she need not search for her family anymore. The four bodies of the dead which had lain buried in the army base in Jaffna for 45 days were airlifted to Colombo on the 24th October. Senior Counsel Kumar Ponnambalam assisted by Thambimuttu Poopalan, attorney-at-law looking after the interest of Prashanthi sought permission to witness the bodies . The order was that they be cremated within two hours with police escort, but if the relatives do not wish to abide by that order, the State would magnanimously cremate them at State expense ! The report in the *Weekend Express* ( a paper that unfortunately became extinct later) said :

> " A ¾inch width rope was found tied round the neck of Rasammah's corpse and she was still dressed in a white printed cotton saree with navy blue border. Kirupamoorthy too appeared to have been strangled in the same manner since the rope was wound tightly round his body. But the bodies of Krishanthi and her brother Pranavan were in several pieces and haphazardly wrapped in black coloured Rexene sheets. A police officer who



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did not wish to be named called *Weekend Express* aside and told us – "On Tuesday the police were asked to take over the investigation into this quadruple murder. I openly say these are not human beings. These are beasts. The bodies were found in a shallow pit in Chemmani, a deserted area under army control. The police immediately placed the suspects under arrest but two corporals have escaped from the camp and are evading arrest."

"The Kankesanturai HQI Wilmon Perera who was entrusted with the tasks of accompanying the bodies to Colombo said that the army in Jaffna was "a disciplined lot" and that they cannot rule out the odd bad eggs. Rasammah's sister who was asked to identify the bodies was in hysterics outside the morgue and screamed at the officers present "Eleven beasts have raped my girl. Chandrika told us that Jaffna people have been liberated and Ratwatte raised the victory flag. Is this what they mean by liberation?

"Mr.Kumar Ponnambalam who got himself personally involved in bringing justice to Prashanthi which has hitherto been denied by the government …was following every move of the security forces, the police and judiciary in order to bring some relief to the Kumaraswamy family. He was constantly in touch with all the media groups in the country. Although a Sinhalese newspaper, a sister publication of a well-established media group published a report on the incident, the English-language counterpart refused even to mention this horrendous crime. . A reporter who tried to persuade the editor to publish the story was told point blank by the editor – "Why don't you compile a book on these unpublished stories?" That being the state of the independent media, not a hum was heard from the State media either.



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> "Mr.Ponnambalam told the *Weekend Express* – "These people are apparently being charged under the normal law. Under this law there are no eye-witnesses. Just like the Bolgoda lake case of STF personnel strangling 21 Tamil youths right in the heart of Colombo at their headquarters. Under normal law the question of confession does not arise. Therefore there is no evidence and the murderers will go scot-free. If you are a Tamil you are charged under emergency regulations. Every Tamil who is arrested – lo and behold – makes a confession and therefore there is evidence against them. This is the advantage of being born a Sinhalese or the disadvantage of being born a Tamil. In this country you will only get Tamils making confessions, according to the police, and not any other communities. I told the Kumaraswamy family – "Do not expect justice"

A number of women's organizations however took up the cry and called upon the President to publicly condemn the brutal act of her armed services personnel. They demanded that the perpetrators of the crimes be punished. Although the call did not evoke any immediate response from the President, the publicity surrounding the incident became increasingly embarrassing for the government. Charge sheets were finally served on nine army personnel accused of abduction, rape and murder on December 2 before the Colombo chief magistrate. The two policemen arrested with these suspects for the same offences had since turned state witnesses for the prosecution. The accused were remanded until February 3, 1997, on which date the case was to be called again.

If Kilinochchi became a dead town after the Sri Lankan military machine captured it on the rebound from the Mullaitivu debacle, reports came of tens of thousands of civilians heading towards the Vavuniya town from the LTTE-controlled areas, "amidst reports of shell attacks, severe food shortages, lack of medicines and a sense of uncertainty looming over them" *Sunday Times,* Colombo, (August 18) reported :-

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"The government was finalizing plans to accommodate 125,000 displaced people in heavily guarded camps at Vavuniya, but was facing criticism from both provincial officials and international NGOs operating inside the district about the hastily made arrangements. Vavuniya's Government Agent, S.Ganesh told the Sunday Times that 35 schools and other buildings had been done up to accommodate the huge flow of refugees. "These people will not be allowed to step out of the schools allocated to them and police will restrict their movements from outside the camps making sure that nobody escapes", Mr.Ganesh said. Refugees flowing in from the Kilinochchi district after walking 40 to 50 miles, told the *Sunday Times* the LTTE has not placed restrictions on civilians leaving the area..."

"The Eelam war has witnessed many kinds of human suffering. But the most ironic of them all is the plight of those detained for no good reason in the transit camps," said Wilson Gnanadas reporting for the *Sunday Leader* on his visit to Vavuniya. 13,257 persons are held against their wishes by the armed forces, he said. They cannot be categorized as refugees. However, they are treated as such merely because, they say they are Tamil-speaking people from the north."

As the year 1996 neared its end there was no let-up in the level of violence nor were there any hopes for peace. On October 22, the Tigers overran the Palliyagodella police post in the Polonnaruwa district killing 13 policemen and three home guards. One of the most severe setbacks to the government since the Mullaitivu debacle happened on December 11, when the Special Task Force camp at Pulukunava in the Amparai district manned by over 140 service personnel was captured by the Tigers. Nearly 500 Tigers, including 100 female Tigers had reportedly arrived in buses and tractors and had launched the surprise attack on the camp at around 1 a.m.. After a 5-hour battle in which at least forty two service personnel were killed, the rest had

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apparently abandoned camp and fled into nearby jungles. The Tigers had then taken away several military vehicles and at least one artillery gun, along with 500 other weapons and ammunition. Meanwhile the navy was placed on high alert in Trincomalee following a failed suicide attempt by two female Sea Tigers to blow up a gunboat in the harbour. One of the two cadres was later identified as "Captain Malathy."( *Sunday Leader*, Dec.15)

**There was high drama on December 7 when an American-built Bell 412 helicopter carrying deputy Defence Minister Ratwatte, army commander Lt.Gen. Rohan Daluwatte, police chief W.B.Rajaguru, overall Operations commander Maj.General Asoka Jayawardene and Vanni district M.P. Premaratne Sumathipala and six other officials and bodyguards was reported missing.** It was the military top brass in one airborne basket. The Bell 412 helicopter normally used to carry VIPs had a seating capacity of 13 excluding two pilots. It had left Colombo at 9 a.m. on course to Weli Oya but had not reached its destination even past 11 a.m. A second helicopter carrying smaller fry followed, unaware of the fate of the first one. Tension in military and political circles in Colombo reached fever pitch for an agonizing four hours when it was known that the chopper had crashed in Tiger-controlled area in the Vanni jungles. Air traffic control towers were alerted, all air force planes, including fighter-bombers were scrambled for emergency search operations and the President herself rushed to Army Headquarters to study the progress of the search operation.

The Deputy Defence Minister "General" Ratwatte, not expected to know much about navigational systems, flight paths and fuel reserves, had developed a sudden desire to do an aerial spot check over bunker lines in Vavuniya when the helicopter was over Anuradhapura, thus necessitating the chopper to veer off on a detour. It was here that the trouble began. Here are some excerpts from the account in the *Sunday Leader* of December 15:

> "Within minutes of the choppers bifurcating flight paths, the Bell 412 was in trouble although veteran pilot Sqdn.Ldr.

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Kotakadeniya tried to keep his dire straits secret from the VIPs in his cabin....the navigational systems had developed a serious mechanical problem that threatened to plummet the occupants at 250 kmph into the jungles of the Vanni 1,500 feet below. ...The Bell 412 was loaded with a full tank of 253 gallons for the 150 nautical miles flight. Now running low of fuel reserves, Sqdn.Ldr. Kotakadeniya was compelled to bring the difficult-to-manoeuvre Bell 412 down to tree top level. The chopper was virtually grazing the thick canopy of foliage and wood when the pilot spotted a clearing in a field of 'ulundu' and managed to bring the limping Bell safely to earth with no more than a severe jolt."

"The occupants of the Bell then disembarked....there the group met a 28-year old Tamil cultivator, his wife and three children. Although both the army commander and the IGP were conversant in Tamil, it was Premaratne Sumathipala who took the situation in hand, putting to ready use his fluency in the language. "Intha idaththuku enna peyar?", wanting to know the name of the hamlet. "Kidachcharu" was the reply. "Intha pakkam LTTE irukutha?", he asked, meaning "Are there any LTTE cadres around?!". Initially reluctant to converse for fear that the men in uniform were part of a military operation, the cultivator reluctantly admitted that the little village was surrounded by Tiger encampments. . This was cause for concern among the party and they did not linger for more than ten minutes. Coaxed by Sumathipala and not in a position to disobey the men, of whom only two bore no arms, the cultivator and his wife were compelled to show part of the group a safe road to Pompemadu, while the other party would try to reach government's lines in an easterly direction.....".

The drama had a happy ending for the VIP survivors after come perilously

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close to being captured by the LTTE, and after hours of trudging to reach the safety of government territory.

All in all, the year 1996 had proved a dismal one for the Chandrika government. On the other hand, there was no gainsaying the fact that the LTTE leader Pirabakaran was commanding more fear and respect from Colombo than ever before. In paying him a left-handed compliment, the "military analyst" of the *Sunday Times*, Colombo, (Dec.1) wrote :

> "Asia's master of terror Velupillai Prabhakaran, reportedly celebrated his birthday on November 26th. He is 42 years old. Every year, astrologers, both Indian and Sri Lankan, continue to predict his death. This has become more common since he was 38. But Prabhakaran lives on. What is the secret of his success even against the Indian military, the fourth largest military in the world. Prabhakaran is an innovator and creator.... His innovation and creativity is seen by looking at his war machine. Prabhakaran has no match on the Sri Lankan side. Prabhakaran thinks and acts politically, economically, militarily and internationally...."

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# Chapter 31

## 1977: Operation land route to Jaffna fails as planes drop from the sky

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# 1977: Operation land route to Jaffna fails as planes drop from the sky

**1997 was to prove a disastrous year for the Sri Lankan armed forces, at land, sea and on the air. While the ambitious "Operation Jaya Sikurui" (Victory Assured) got bogged down after eight months of futile warfare with heavy losses of men and material, the year saw no fewer than ten planes belonging to the Air Force drop from the sky! To compound it all, 32,400 rounds of 81 mm mortar bombs ordered by the army from Zimbabwe Defence Industries never reached Colombo harbour. It was almost certain that the cargo was intercepted at sea and had gone into the hands of the LTTE. The year also saw the Tigers again bringing the war into Colombo's tourist district with a truck bomb that brought destruction to the twin-towered World Trade Centre and adjoining hotels.**

The year itself began with a serious military reverse for the government. While the government forces were planning a massive operation against the LTTE, the Tigers pre-empted the move and on January 9 launched a pre-dawn surprise attack themselves. At 3 a.m. thousands of Tigers, both male and female, attacked the main A-9 Kandy-Jaffna highway between Elephant Pass and Paranthan from both east and west, capturing it and cutting off Paranthan and Kilinochchi. At the same time, swarms of Tigers attacked the Paranthan army camp itself, getting through the defence lines at several places. While troops at the Paranthan camp were being pinned down in an

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effort to prevent the camp from being overrun, the Tigers launched a major onslaught on the southern flank of the Elephant Pass military base. It was only after dawn that the air force came to the rescue with Kfir and F-bombers pounding either side of the main road but meanwhile the Tigers had either destroyed or got away with some heavy armour.

Soldiers at one artillery battery reported (*The Island,* Jan.12) that they destroyed nine artillery guns to prevent them from being captured before they fled as the Tigers approached. A statement from the LTTE said their cadres destroyed two 130mm artillery guns, nine 122 mm artillery guns and took away three 120 mm heavy mortars, three five-zero heavy machine guns, hundreds of automatic rifles and large stocks of ammunition and mortar shells – weapons that would be turned against government forces themselves in future battles. While the death toll on the government side exceeded 200, the LTTE also admitted losing 140 of their cadres. Although government troops later regrouped and linked up Paranthan and Elephant Pass after the Tigers withdrew, the loss of such heavy armour was to prove a loss of face for the government. Each piece of the 130 mm artillery for example was worth US$ 65,000.

On the rebound from the Paranthan-Elephant Pass battle losses, the government launched a new offensive on February 4 in the northwest code-named *Edibala.* Although the details of the actual objectives of the offensive were not known at first, it was stated the intention was to clear the 70 kilometre route from Vavuniya to Mannar that was under the control of the LTTE. The road was surrounded by thick jungle, a terrain unfamiliar to the nearly ten thousand government troops involved in the operation. The Tigers, who unlike government forces, saw no need to occupy territory, melted away in the jungles offering no resistance whatever. Their minds were also busy elsewhere. While the success of Operation *Edibala* caused euphoria in military circles, with army commander Lt.Gen.Rohan Daluwatte claiming that *"most of the battle with the LTTE is over"* and that "*clearly, the Tigers have been weakened"* (*Sunday Times,* March 2) the Tigers went

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on the offensive in the East. On February 2, shortly after midnight, LTTE cadres led by the Batticaloa commander Karuna launched two attacks, one on the Mavadivembu army camp and the other on the Vetrilaikerni camp. Demolishing the fortified bunkers of the latter with rocket propelled grenades, they removed some small arms and fled.

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan air force had begun to lose planes with a regularity that did not appear to cause much concern to the air force authorities. On February 22, a Russian-made AN-32 transport plane leaving for Palaly air base in the north with 59 passengers crashed during take-off at Ratmalana airport, and broke in two. Four servicemen from the army, navy and police died in the crash with around 46 badly injured and hospitalized in Colombo hospitals. Zonal Commander Air Commodore Jayasekera and other high-ranking air force officers who had rushed to the scene in casual attire looked nonplussed. The Air Commodore told pressmen he was very shocked as to how the AN-32 purchased only the previous year from Russia at a cost of around US$ 2.5 million had failed pilot attempts to abort the scheduled take-off. The pilot, co-pilot and two Russian engineers on board escaped with injuries. (*Weekend Express,* Feb.22-23)

Air Vice-Marshal Anselm Peries who admitted that the Air Force had lost several planes in the recent past, said "*It will definitely not be a blow to the military offensive currently going on or to any in the future."(Reuters).* The crash was the fourth incident involving an air force plane during the first two months of the year. In January, a Chinese-built Y-12 plane went missing off the northern coast with its crew of four apparently killed. A few days later, an Israeli-built Kfir fighter jet fell into the sea shortly after take-off from the air base at Katunayake due to suspected mechanical failure. The pilot ejected to safety. Also in January an unmanned Air Force drone, used for reconnaissance was lost over the Jaffna peninsula. More were to follow in the course of the year. Commented Air Vice Marshal Harry Goonetileke (retd) : "*Three aircraft in five days (one pilotless) and four within six weeks! Reminiscent of World War II and unparalleled in the history of local insurrections world-*

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*wide, making it a nightmare beginning for the Sri Lankan Air Force in 1997".(WE,* Feb.8-9*)*

**130 Tamils drowned.** Just a day before the AN-32 crashed at Ratmalana, another tragedy of human proportions occurred in the north. *Operation Edibala* might have warmed the cockles of the heart of the military, but as in all operations undertaken by the Sri Lankan armed forces, the net result was not the weakening of the LTTE but the infliction of human suffering on Tamil civilians, making them uprooted and displaced and leaving them no choice but to flee for safety. Following the indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas, 150 Tamil men, women and children boarded an overloaded refugee boat in Mannar in their attempt to escape to India. The boat sank off the coast of Mannar and 130 of the passengers drowned. Mannar went into mourning with white flags flown in the areas held by the LTTE.

Lulled by the false belief after *Operation Edibala* that the LTTE had been weakened, March 5 came as an eye-opener to the Colombo military establishment. On that day, the Tigers made three simultaneous attacks on targets in the East. They attacked the massive air force base at China Bay with mortars, (the first time it happened) destroyed a Chinese-built Y12 aircraft parked there, overran the Vavunativu army camp in Batticaloa, killing over 75 soldiers and wounding 70 others, some of them seriously, and attacked the Three Brigade Headquarters in Batticaloa, killing two women soldiers and a police constable. The Tigers who admitted losing 84 of their cadres also took away a sizeable quantity of weapons from the Vavunativu army camp. *"Tiger Triple jump in the eastern theatre"* was the headline in the *Sunday Times* of March 9. Two months later, on May 12, as the government was bracing for a major military offensive in the north, in Vavuniya, the Tigers struck again in the east attacking the Morawewa police station. Sixteen policemen were reported killed and fifteen others injured in the attack.

On the political front, the month of March saw the People's Alliance scoring an impressive victory in the local government elections on the 21st

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amidst allegations of intimidation and rigging. According to official results released on the 22nd, 194 out of the 238 councils were won by the ruling PA while the UNP won only 43 councils though it retained control of major cities like Colombo and Kandy.

**The long awaited government offensive code-named Jaya Sikurui (Sure Victory) aimed at seizing a vital 75-km stretch of the highway linking Vavuniya to Jaffna peninsula was launched on May 12. Involving some 20,000 soldiers, it was the biggest government offensive planned against the LTTE.** For the government, the stakes were high. Having taken control of Jaffna, ferrying supplies from the mainland to thousands of troops and an estimated 400,000 Tamil civilians in the peninsula by sea and air was becoming a logistical nightmare, particularly with the hazards of losing transport planes. A land route could not only overcome that problem but it could also deprive the LTTE of control of any part of government territory. To the LTTE, the outcome of the operation was therefore equally vital.

As in all government offensives, the first major casualties were the Tamil civilians. On the very second day of the operation, relentless day and night shelling by government forces from all directions – from Vavuniya, Weli Oya, Kilinochchi and Elephant Pass, along with bombing from the air, made several thousands of civilians in the Tamil villages of Nedunkerni, Omanthai and Puliyankulam desert their homes and flee for their lives, seeking shelter in what they believed to be safe areas. Bombing by a Kfir plane at Mallawi had caused unknown number of casualties and destroyed homes and buildings. On the third day of the operation, 136 refugees were reported fleeing to India by boats and arriving at Rameswaram.

Fighting was reportedly fierce on the third day at Kuruvikulam near Omanthai, but casualties on both sides were not known immediately. While government troops kept inching their way, two of the government armoured vehicles were destroyed, according to the government, by Tiger suicide cadres.. Army sources finally took control of Omanthai and Nedunkerni, but

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apparently at heavy human cost, admitting that they had lost 85 soldiers with nearly 600 wounded a hundred of them seriously. In Anuradhapura hospital alone 361 government soldiers had been admitted with injuries. Government casualties could be gauged from the fact that for the first time in the war government was compelled to bring in 3,000 sailors from the navy to help in a land operation, apart from 5,000 new troops. The sailors were entrusted with the job of retaining control of Omanthai. The first phase of Jaya Sikurui was called off after six days of fighting, with the failure of the stated objective of capturing Puliyankulam.

Even as the second phase of the operation began on the 23rd, one could detect a certain recklessness on the part the government in going ahead with the offensive regardless of human cost from both sides. If the holding operations at Omanthai needed 3,000 sailors, how was the government going to find enough troops to hold on to 75 kilometres of territory? A sensitive Sinhalese, a top air force man no less, Wing Commander Mark Seneviratne wrote in the *Weekend Express* of May 17-18, 1997:-

> "WEEP FOR PEACE, SRI LANKA....The launching of the offensive, heralded by heavy artillery shelling of the Wanni and its people, as well as aircraft diving from the skies to blast anything that moved, whether hare or human, saw the media screaming out banner deadlines, while we the people lapped up all the news about the offensive like school kids do today with the latest brand of ice cream that has hit the streets. From now on, just like what we have done before, we will avidly read gory details of battles where huge battle tanks bulldoze their way through cultivations produced by the sweat and toil of starving people – firing their cannons liberally. We would also read about the infantry following in the train of those tanks, machine gunning most anything that moved..".
>
> "The tragedy of it all is also that most of us may not even

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> be consciously aware of how weird our reactions to the horrors of battles and offensives have grown! Very few among us seem to have realized that the war is bringing out the ghouls in us. How many of us have identified the alarm bells which yell out that our traditions, cultures, and civilizations are being carried towards a precipice, because what this is doing to our minds and souls....
>
> "Today, around seventy thousand people north of Mannar, who had been provided with inadequate quantities of food, have been denied even that unless they trek many miles to collect the food from the liberated (government controlled) areas! How much more cruel, and cold could we become to our countrymen?....."

How one wishes that the Sinhalese nation had produced a few million Mark Seneviratnes, who could have influenced the Sinhalese leaders and the Sinhalese-owned Colombo media and altered the course of Sri Lanka's tragic history!

Even as Wing Commander Mark Seneviratne's lament about "ghouls" appeared in the *Weekend Express* on the 17th, there happened in the East the same day a ghoulish incident that reminded one of the fate of Krishanthi the previous year. A 35-year old mother of four children, Koneswary was not only gang-raped by policemen, but was killed in a brutal manner that defies belief. They killed her by exploding a grenade in her genitals. The incident occurred on the night of the 17th at the Camp 11 colony on the border between Batticaloa and Amparai. With a view to hide the truth the police had ordered that the victim be buried immediately. Both the M.P. Joseph Pararajasingam and TELO leader N.Srikantha sent protests to the President demanding an immediate inquiry and calling for the perpetrators of the act be punished. It was stated that the President did order an inquiry, but the outcome was disappointing.



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While the government forces were making comfortable plans to renew their efforts to capture Puliyankulam by linking up their advances from two directions, the LTTE leader sprang a surprise . Iqbal Athas took up the story in his column for the *Sunday Times* of June 15.

> Unknown to the army field commanders making plans to achieve a significant milestone in the 15 year old war – the capture of Puliyankulam, - from his hide-out somewhere in the jungles of Nedunkerny, LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was busy making other plans that were to delay the link-up. He ordered his confidant **Karuna** (the Batticaloa military wing leader), to launch a counter offensive."
>
> That Monday whilst "Jaya Sikurui" troops were taking a well-earned rest, Karuna and his men trekked through the jungles and pathways (west of the Vavuniya-Jaffna highway) towards Thandikulam, - (five kilometers **north** of Vavuniya town) - **The move of some 600 heavily armed LTTE cadres, both young men and women, who towed artillery guns took even the intelligence community by surprise. The arsenal that moved with them included rocket-propelled grenades, their improvised Arul grenades, machine guns and double cabs mounted with Fifty-calibre (Point Five Zero) guns**.... When the night grew in marked contrast to the burst of shells and crackle of gun fire that rendered the air when "Operation Jaya Sikurui" began, there was unusual calm not only in Thandikulam but also in Vavuniya. Hours ticked by and Tuesday dawned.
>
> Around 2.10 a.m. loud explosions rendered the air. Artillery shells began to rain on Vavuniya town and its environs. Some landed on the Sri Lankan Air Force base whilst others fell at the adjoining Headquarters of Task Force Two.....By Wednesday night a grim picture emerged. A staggering 180 soldiers were



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killed and 27 more were missing in action. Military officials fear that those declared missing may also be dead thus bringing the death toll to 207. More than 320 soldiers were wounded in action. Of this number over 90 have been classed in the category of severely injured. ...Besides the loss of huge quantities of artillery shells, assorted ammunition, two Main Battle Tanks and two artillery guns have been wrecked. Ambulances and a fleet of vehicles have been damaged. Two 25 pounder guns have also been damaged. The real extent of the damage will be known only after a Court of Inquiry probes the incident. But senior military officials estimate the losses to exceed Rs.200 million.

An AFP report headlined "***Tigers strike back with a vengeance***" *(Asian Age, June 11)* gave more details.

Tamil Tiger rebels blasted ammunition dumps, destroyed a vital bridge and crippled a helicopter gunship on Tuesday in a desperate bid to halt a Sri Lankan army offensive, officials said....A Russian-built MI-24 attack helicopter was also hit by the militants. The pilots landed safely but the aircraft was unserviceable, official sources said.

A subsequent AFP report under the headline ***"Over 342 killed as Tamil Tigers maul the Army"*** said:-

"The death toll in a ferocious battle between the Army with the Tamil rebels on Wednesday rose to 342 with the discovery of further dead soldiers, officials said. The defence ministry said 210 rebels were killed, but for their part the Tigers admitted losing 50 of their cadres....Local residents in Vavuniya said LTTE rebels pulled back from the small town of Thandikulam after pulverizing the army base.

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The sheer audacity of the idea of launching an attack from the north when all eyes were on the operations to the south of Thandikulam could never have crossed the minds of the generals who were in charge of the government forces. Nirupama Subramaniam reporting for the *Indian Express* (June 13) quoted 37-year old police constable Bandula Sarath Kumar who crawled on all fours for more than a kilometre to save his life as saying ,

> "he heard the sound of children talking. He and the other two constables at the post peeked out and what they saw froze their blood; rows upon rows of children in fatigues firing laser bullets as they advanced towards their check post. ...There were lots of women cadres walking about as if they owned the place!"

Following the Thandikulam counter attack the government faced further embarrassment two weeks later when the Division 55 headquarters under Brigadier Shantha Kottegoda (who was to become army chief seven years later) was overrun and destroyed at Periyamadu – this despite the military intelligence report of an impending Tiger attack. Shantha Kottegoda managed to escape but army sources themselves said 116 soldiers were killed in this second Tiger counter attack. The LTTE claimed they captured one 120 mm heavy mortar, 300 rounds of artillery ammo, and other heavy weapons. *"Blinded in the Vanni quagmire"*, wrote "Taraki" (D.Sivaram, the knowledgeable commentator on military logistics) – in the *Sunday Times* of June 29, 1997 :- *"The government is relentlessly pushing the army into the Vanni quagmire. The effects of this would be evident soon."*. Mocking at the government military strategists who point to the "depletion in LTTE's manpower" and argue that it is only a matter of time before Prabhakaran's military machine grinds to a halt, Taraki commented – *" I can only say that those who cling on to this line of thinking, despite the stark military realities of Eelam War III , may be having their coffee and liqueur at Sri Lanka's last chance hotel"*

After six months of the stalled Operation *Jaya Sikurui* what was the state

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of play in the Vanni? It was a case of counting the losses and speculating whether Pirabakaran was planning a third counter attack! The month of July began with the military police launching a massive countrywide search for more than 10,000 soldiers who had deserted their ranks. It was stated that since 1995, more than 30,000 troops had deserted the army. However, after the government offered them amnesty, 20,000 surrendered, leaving 10,000 soldiers at large. Three hundred airmen who deserted the air force were also at large.

Elsewhere, at sea the Sea Tigers began targeting cargo ships used to ferry war material to Jaffna. On 8 July two boatloads of heavily armed Sea Tigers seized a South Korean cargo vessel "Mor Ran Bong" commissioned to carry government cargo. Having ordered the vessel to divert course towards Mullaitivu they stripped the ship of its radio communication sets, radar and other equipment. They also siphoned off fuel, lubricants and looted the supplies. A week earlier, the "MV Missen", a passenger ferry chartered by the government was also seized by the Tigers. Stepping up an economic offensive against the government, there was the earlier incident on May 29, when Sea Tigers triggered an underwater explosion on the Greek cargo vessel "Athena" when it had been weighing anchor in the outer area of Trincomalee port. A Press release from the LTTE dated 15 July gave the warning that ships supplying the military in Jaffna will be targeted. "*We cannot be party to the government ruse of shipping war materials to Jaffna under the pretext of supplying food and necessities for the people",* the Press statement said.

**The mystery of the missing mortars.** How can 32,400 rounds of 81 mm mortar bombs ordered by the Sri Lankan government from the State-owned Zimbabwe Defence Industries (ZDI), and the order duly executed by the Zimbabwe authorities on May 21 go missing at sea? The consignment was reported to have been loaded into a vessel "part chartered" by ZDI that had arrived in Madagascar on July 2. The vessel which was expected at Colombo harbour within six to ten days never reached Colombo even after 40 days. On June 18, Navy Commander Rear Admiral Tissera sent out a signal to Navy

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bases countrywide warning that a vessel carrying arms/ammo to Sri Lanka has gone missing.. He gave the name of the vessel as *"Stillus Limmasul."* sailing under the Greek flag. He asserted that the name of the vessel was NOT in the Lloyds Shipping Register, and warned of the possibility of the LTTE having hijacked it.

The news took a more startling turn when a fax message was received by the United States embassy in Colombo. Typed in capital letters the message was titled NOTICE AND WARNING. The message said:

> "We, the Tamil Tigers, inform you by the present that on 11 July 1997 we have hijacked a vessel carrying arms, sailing under Liberian flag. The name of the vessel "Stillus Victoria". On the deck of the vessel there were 12 containers containing 32,400 mortar bombs 81 mm. destined for Colombo, Sri Lanka, Ministry of (witten in hand) Defence. We know that the manufacturer and the supplier of the mortar bombs is Zimbabwe Defense Industry from Harare, Zimbabwe. We also know that the deal was executed by Col.Dube, D.G. of Zimbabwe Defense Industry. The cargo was confiscated by us and the vessel's crew was released by us unharmed. We make know and warn that we will take action against all persons participating in the supply of military equipment used against the legitimate rights of the Tamil people and we will severely punish those concerned.. LTTE."

The faxed message did not come on the LTTE letterhead; nor was it sent to any other diplomatic mission.. The LTTE spokesman in London Anton Rajah denied any knowledge of it in an interview he gave the BBC Sinhala programme *Sandesaya.* But the details stated in the LTTE message were mainly accurate, except that the name of the vessel was given as *"Stillus Victoria"* and that it was sailing under the Liberian flag. The facts contained in the LTTE message could have been known only to three parties – Army

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Headquarters in Colombo, the suppliers, Zimbabwe Defence Industries and the ship's captain who had the cargo manifest. How then could the Tigers have known the contents unless they had seen the manifest? There was however an interesting discrepancy in the way the word "defence" was spelt in the typed version which had the American spelling "defense" while the handwritten one was spelt the English way. That could have a bearing in getting behind the mystery.

A further development came in August when a ship by the name of *Stillus Limmosul Victoria* was finally tracked down to a port in France, but the 12 containers containing the lethal cargo had disappeared. Shockingly enough, the captain of the ship, a Frenchman, said that the LTTE had hijacked the ship on July 10 off the northern coast of Sri Lanka , had unloaded the containers, and released the ship and crew the following day, July 11! Although Interpol was able to track down the ship, it was stated that the mysterious captain could not be traced later!

Tim McGirk, in a story datelined Valvettiturai (!) came out with a more interesting version in the issue of *TIME* magazine (Feb.9, 1998) the following year. He wrote :-

> "While finding his way through the maze of Rome's airport last March, a dapper arms manufacturer from Zimbabwe named Tshinga Dube paused for a few seconds and put down his briefcase. It vanished. Inside were documents on the sale of 32,400 rounds of 81-mm mortars to the Sri Lankan army. With them, the Sri Lankans hoped to blast open a strategic road and break the hold of Tamil Tiger rebels in the palmyrah jungles in the northern part of the island.
>
> At the time, Colonel Dube didn't worry much about his missing briefcase. He figured it had been grabbed by one of the airport's numerous snatch-and-run artists. Moving swiftly Dube ordered copies of the stolen papers, and his company

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Zimbabwe Defense Industries, went ahead with the $3 million sale to Sri Lanka. On May 23, the mortars were transported to Beira, a port in Mozambique, and loaded into a freighter bound for Colombo. The ship docked on July 2 in Madagascar. Then, like the Colonel's briefcase, it too had disappeared.

Nobody in the Sri Lankan Defense Ministry seemed too upset by the freighter's absence until July 14, when a mysterious fax arrived at the United States Embassy in Colombo claiming to be from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The message which lacked the group's usual letterhead of a snarling tiger, seemed to be an outrageous hoax. ...But instead of laughing at the fax, officials in the Defense Ministry got nervous. Checking records, they realized that the shipload of mortars was nearly a month late. With growing dread, the authorities ran a check on the vessel, the Stillus Limmasul. Bad news: no ship by that name was registered. The mortars had been grabbed by the Tigers.

Just how they pulled off this high-seas sting isn't clear, but it seems the Tigers may have secretly owned the ship all along. Now the stolen mortars are being used against the intended recipients. More than 900 Sri Lankan soldiers have been killed, mostly by 81-mm mortar shells, in the 8-month long operation to open the Jaffna-Vavuniya road. Says Major General Balagalle, commander of the northern peninsula of Jaffna: "Before, the Tigers would fire a single mortar. Now they are firing 10 or 12. Mortars are coming down on our boys like anything".....

The stalled Operation *Jaya Sikurui* resumed in early August after nearly hundred days with pitched battles resulting in heavy losses of life for both the LTTE and the army. The LTTE said they lost 126 of their fighters in attacking the "heavily defended military fortifications" at Omanthai while over that many government soldiers too were killed. A little town of Puliyankulam

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about 17 kilometres away from Mankulam soon became the focal point of the war. Insignificant in size as it was, it stood at strategic crossroads in the Vanni. On the 22nd August, the Government announced their forces had captured the Puliyankulam railway station, a small prize, but that was not the end of the story as far as Puliyankulam went. The only thing that remained at the station was the platform. The buildings were destroyed in the fighting and the rail tracks and sleepers had been used by the Tigers for building their defences. According to Colombo Press reports, the army was yet to enter Puliyankulam town. Tall claims made by the government regarding the two-month battle for Puliyankulam came under ridicule even from the "Defence Correspondent" of *The Island.* Writing in the issue of Sunday, August 24, he said:-

> "There is no doubt that the ministry's claims of Tiger casualties should be confined to children's fairy tales. Its habit of killing Tigers in nice round figures of one hundred and thirty, sixty and one hundred are clear indications that these figures are nothing but totals of estimates given by field officers. who in turn are summing up the reports of their soldiers.... Very few bodies of Tigers are ever recovered after battles. The army's explanation is that the Tigers drag away their comrades' bodies. This is partially correct. **The LTTE displays an almost god-like reverence for its dead and has built up a cult of martyrdom. The many days in the year that they dedicate to their dead with elaborate public ceremonies are proof of this. The beautifully maintained cemetery which soldiers found in Jaffna is further evidence of this."**

Mid-September marked the beginning of the fifth month of "Operation Jaya *Sikurui",* but 20,000 government troops were yet languishing in the general area of Puliyankulam . Failing to take Puliyankulam in a direct thrust from the A1 highway in the face of dogged Tiger resistance, attempts to outflank the LTTE through Kanakarayan Kulam (midway between

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Puliyankulam and Mankulam) also met with no success. Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department which had been keeping a close watch on the ground situation in Sri Lanka announced the inclusion of the LTTE among thirty groups identified in the world as terrorist organizations. This was followed by the arrival of a team of elite US Green Beret commandos in Colombo. This was the third batch of US troops to arrive under the ongoing "*Operation Balanced Style*"– the Pentagon's military programme to train Sri Lankan troops to fight "terrorism". It was perhaps no coincidence that the Tigers decided at this point of time to take the war into Colombo.

**World Trade Centre bombed.** On October 15, twenty months after the Central Bank bombing, another powerful bomb hit the city centre of Colombo. A truck packed with explosives brought death and destruction to the city's tourist district right up to the doorstep of the country's rich and middle class. Twenty people were killed, including at least four of the attackers and over a hundred were hurt including thirty foreign nationals, seven of whom were Americans. The area between the two towers of Colombo's tallest building – the 39-storey World Trade Centre - was entirely shattered by the truck bomb. Three floors of the Trade Centre were ripped open and the building's glass façade covering its lobby and foyer area was smashed. Several adjacent hotels and landmarks including the Galadari Hotel, owned by the Galadari brothers of Dubai, and the Colombo Hilton also sustained heavy damage. The blast, according to reports, was heard some 10 km away from the city and almost all the buildings in the area had their windows smashed. Galadari Hotel's General Manager Graham Hatch denied rumours that the Tigers had targeted the US Green Beret soldiers, but the timing of the bombing seemed to suggest that there was some hidden message for the U.S. government.

In fact, State-run television quoting unnamed sources said the attack may have been aimed at the green Berets. A spokesman for the US embassy in Colombo told the *Sunday Leader* (Oct.19)

"Seven US citizens were injured in the attack, of which only

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> one needed to be hospitalized. He was however non-committal as to whether any of the Green Berets were among the injured. He said several US citizens were staying at the Galadari and Hilton hotels, including US government personnel, but the embassy was not in a position to give further details "due to the privacy laws governing US citizens!"

The mystery of how the LTTE managed to get an explosive-laden lorry carrying arms and ammunition well past a multitude of road blocks along Colombo's high security zone was never explained by the investigators. That lorry had enough weapons to arm a platoon according to security sources. LTTE's ability to transport such a large quantity of high explosives and then assemble the device within the zone was alarming, they said. They believe it had been exploded from a distance using a remote controlled device. As soon as the explosion occurred the attackers had fled the scene firing their weapons indiscriminately. Three of them sought refuge in Lake House and were able to resist special forces troops for more than six hours (*The Island* Oct. 19). But the security breach on that day was not the only one that year. On November 14, the Tigers set off a series of explosions after attaching improvised devices on fuel tanks at Kelanitissa power plant. They had infiltrated the plant around 4 a.m. after cutting through a chain-linked fence.

While the country's attention was riveted to the Colombo blast, the LTTE quietly acquired a strategically important piece of real estate in the eastern province without firing a shot, wrote **Taraki,** the well-informed political and military commentator in the *Sunday Times* (Oct.19).

> "....The organization (LTTE) lost about 800 square kilometers in Jaffna to the army in Operation Riviresa. But the Tigers gained 2300 sq.km. in the east after the army vacated forty four camps in the Batticaloa district. The closure of eight camps in Mutur this week will add at least another 1000

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> sq.km. to this territory controlled by the LTTE. .... Herein lies the dilemma the army faces in fighting the Tigers...It has to abandon territory and population to the LTTE in the east to meet the increasing resource demands of the expanding theatre of operations in the Wanni"

While Operation *Jaya Sikurui* was meandering towards the end of the year and getting stuck in the monsoon mud with no hope of even capturing Puliyankulam, there came the problem of face-saving. Something had to be done, and Anuruddha Ratwatte, the Deputy Defence Minister, a politician appointed "General" by the President and was personally directing the military campaign egged his commanders to try a final push. He was banking on the US Green Beret-trained Commandos to lead the battle. That proved to be another disaster. At least 147 soldiers, mostly the specially-trained commandos were killed in fierce battles when Operation *Jaya Sikurui* resumed on December 4. A further 22 were reported missing in action, and another 396 who were injured were admitted to Anuradhapura and Colombo hospitals. In a statement issued from London, the Tigers claimed they had recovered 133 bodies of Government soldiers. The statement said 113 bodies "which were in good condition" were handed over to the ICRC (confirmed by the latter) and the remaining 20 bodies which were in a bad condition were cremated by them. "*Worst-ever commando debacle*" ran the headline in the *Sunday Times* of Dec.7. Undaunted, the Green Berets were back again in Sri Lanka giving training to Sri Lankan soldiers at an undisclosed location. They were due to fly home during the weekend (*Sunday Times,* Dec.21)

In the history of the Eelam wars, the year 1997 would be remembered, the debacles on land apart, for the bizarre sequence of aircraft losses. No less than eleven planes of various descriptions were lost in the course of the year. This was the chronological record: *January 17:* A pilotless reconnaissance plane crashes in LTTE-held Pooneryn; *January 20*: Y-12 reconnaisance plane disappears with a 4-member crew 80 miles northeast of Palaly; *January 21*: Kfir jet crashes into Negombo lagoon. Pilot ejects

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to safety; *February 21*: Antonov AN-32B crashes while taking off from Ratmalana. Four dead and 36 wounded. *March 6*: Tigers attack China Bay air force camp destroying a Chinese-built Y-12. One airman killed; *March 16:* Argentine-built Pucara explodes in mid-air and crashes in Polonnaruwa district; *March 19:* Ukraininan-built Mi-24 "Hind" helicopter disappears off Mullaitivu. Eight men missing; *May 1:* Unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) crashes in Vavuniya district; *June 14:* Air Force training aircraft single-engined Sia Marchetti crashes in Anuradhapura killing one; *November 10*: Mi-24 shot down by LTTE missiles. Both pilots killed. *November 25:* Bell 212 helicopter crashes at Puliyankulam killing four crew members. In just two and a half years of the so-called Eelam War III between April 1995 and December 1997 twenty two planes were lost, costing the country over Rs.3 billion. The LTTE's acquisition of Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAM) has also raised the technological intensity of the war as well its cost.

Unfortunately, the miserable record of the war that year did not seem to have troubled Deputy Defence Minister Ratwatte. Addressing a news conference before he hosted members of the Foreign Correspondents Association for dinner at his residence, he said the ongoing 7-month long "Operation Jaya Sikurui" would be completed in time for Independence Day in February 4 1998. He declared that neither he nor the army was worried about casualties because war meant casualties. He did not think foreign training was necessary. The US Green Berets were only giving lectures, he said. Asked if after opening of the land route to Jaffna there would be talks with the LTTE, Mr.Ratwatte said the LTTE would be welcome for talks if it laid down arms. On whether he would meet LTTE leader Prabhakaran, General Ratwatte said: "***I will meet him and shake hands with him, but only after we win and he is defeated"*** *(Sunday Times,* Colombo Dec.14)

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# Chapter 32

## 1998 : Kilinochchi falls to the Tigers. Operation Jaya Sikurui called off.



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# 1998 : Kilinochchi falls to the Tigers. Operation Jaya Sikurui called off.

**The year 1998 was to begin on an ominous note for Sri Lanka when on Sunday January 25, Tamil Tiger rebels staged a daring suicide attack on the sacred Buddhist shrine – the Temple of the Tooth - in the hill resort of Kandy. The year also ended with the worst military debacle for the government in its 17-year old war with the Tamil Tigers and the abandoning of the longest ever battle begun by the Sri Lankan armed forces.**

The historic town of Kandy was sprucing up to host the 50th anniversary of Sri Lanka's independence on February 4, and it was from the "*Pattirippuwa*" (the Octagon) in the temple that President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga was to address the nation on that day. Among those who were to assemble at the audience hall was the Prince of Wales, Prince Charles who was to be the guest of honour. But nine days before that, the Tigers struck. The bombing came even as troops and police were on red alert for just such an attack by the LTTE. But despite the tight security, three suicide bombers broke though a roadblock and detonated their explosives-laden truck right in front of the Dalada Maligawa, as the temple was known. At least eight civilians were killed instantly, while more than 25 were wounded. Police said they had recovered body parts of the three suicide bombers together with two assault rifles and ammunition. While Buddhist sentiment was justifiably angered, the government itself made the mistake of politicizing what was


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held to be a sacred area. Innumerable Hindu temples and Tamil churches had been bombed and destroyed in the past, but that did not account for much in a country that held the majority religion as the *de facto* religion of the country.

The huge truck bombing was reported to have left a crater big enough to bury an elephant and made the showpiece town look like it had been hit by a hurricane. A temple spokesman said the inner sanctum of the temple had miraculously escaped and the shrine where the Buddha's left canine tooth was supposedly enshrined was unharmed. Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte who had taken charge of the jubilee celebrations in Kandy said after the attack : *"We will begin repairs immediately. The terrorists cannot force us to change our plans. We will have the independence celebrations in Kandy as scheduled"*. But as was usual with statements made by this Minister, that promise did not hold good. Wiser counsel prevailed and the celebrations were shifted to Colombo. Meanwhile, a 1000-strong mob attacked the Sri Selva Vinayagar Hindu temple at Katukelle at Kandy, in retaliation for the bombing of the Dalada Maligawa. Statues of 22 deities that were over 300 years old were damaged. Some weighing over a ton were toppled. The tills and the priest's quarters were looted. The chief trustee of the temple estimated the damage caused to the temple at about Rs.20 million (*The Island,* Feb.8). **The Dalada Maligawa bombing led to a massive outcry from the Buddhist monks calling for a ban on the LTTE, and this the President promptly did under an extraordinary gazette notification.**

The month of January had already begun with another disaster on January 2 connected with the independence celebrations. A Russian-built Mi-17 transport helicopter which was to be put on show at the independence celebrations came under heavy mortar attack by the LTTE after it had landed at Olumadhu army detachment between Mankulam and Vavuniya. The two pilots who were in the cockpit of the helicopter were seriously wounded and the helicopter itself, valued at US$ 1.6 million was a write-off. Surprisingly, the detachment commander had assured the air force headquarters in

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Colombo that landing of choppers was safe because the detachment was in a well-secured area.

Independence Day in Colombo was ushered in by military parades, helicopters, fighter planes and an interminable cultural show , "*part of it watched by a hot and besuited Prince of Wales, who filled in the time reading a guide book about the island from cover to cover*" wrote Christopher Thomas, (*The Times,* London, Feb.5). He added:

> "President Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, for whom a couple of hours' tardiness is quite customary, kept the Prince sweating for some time. She eventually made a spectacular entrance heralded by bugles, her bullet-proof limousine escorted by a fleet of motorcyclists in crisp uniforms"

Independence Day came and went, but the month of February was to prove as tragically eventful as the previous one. Within hours of the departure of the Prince from the country, a woman suicide bomber blew herself up at a checkpoint near the Air Force headquarters in Colombo, killing eleven persons including herself, two soldiers, three airmen and passengers in a van in which she had come. At Thampalakamam in the east, policemen after a drinking orgy were reported to have massacred eight Tamils on February 1, which incident came to light only several days later. At Mirusuvil near Chavakachcheri in the army-controlled north, seven soldiers were killed in a Vietcong like ambush on February 16, which proved that LTTE cadres could penetrate army-controlled Jaffna at will. On the 23rd, Sea Tigers on a suicide attack rammed their explosives-packed boats against a navy cargo ship and a landing craft carrying 108 soldiers and sailors, escorted by several gunboats. Both the "*Pabbatha*" which was carrying two armoured personnel carriers and the "*Valampuri*" sank after catching fire. Sixty two security personnel were reported rescued, but at least 51 soldiers or sailors were feared killed.

But the most damaging news of the month in early February was kept under wraps by the government; that was the ferocious LTTE attacks on the

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two military garrisons, Kilinochchi and Paranthan on February 1. It was not as if there were no warnings. Images sent by an unmanned reconnaissance vehicle on January 28 showed a Tiger build-up in the outer perimeter of the Kilinochchi military complex.. Coded messages were sent by military intelligence of a possible impending attack. The air force ordered all helicopter gunships to be on standby. Orders were barked to soldiers manning the outer perimeter to shoot at sight. But all that was of no avail. Roy Denish of the *Sunday Leader* said in the issue of Feb.8: (excerpts):-

> "....An LTTE column began marching towards the Kilinochchi camps from Rudrapuram, another from Murasumoodai and a third from Puliyankulam...LTTE's Leopard Wing under Velupillai Pirabakaran took the soldiers unawares by employing pincer tactics. All three columns overran the forward defence lines, killing an unknown number of soldiers and moved towards the garrison. Reaching the garrison, 10 cadres of the LTTE suicide squad reached the artillery positions and leaped on the artillery pieces, blowing them up. ...Overall Commander of Operation Jaya Sikurui Maj.Gen. Lal Weerasuriya ordered three ground attack aircraft to be airborne immediately. The three aircraft bombarded enemy positions for half an hour and returned to base. Earlier, the Vavuniya airbase refused to evacuate casualties at night as it would be a dangerous mission to undertake...."
>
> "At Kilinochchi it was mayhem, soldiers running helter-skelter, not knowing who was firing at whom. The LTTE cadres launched mortar attacks on the communication towers, destroying them. The blowing up of the communication towers was a major handicap for the soldiers at Kilinochchi. No information could be passed on to the other garrisons. While the battle was raging at Kilinochchi, a group of LTTE cadres crawled through marshy land and began cutting the chainlink

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> fence of Paranthan military camp. The LTTEers who infiltrated Paranthan camp were from Uriyan, a village between Elephant Pass and Paranthan. The LTTE cadres' main aim was to delink Paranthan and Elephant Pass and prevent reinforcements to Kilinochchi…."

After five hours of fighting, the LTTE withdrew, carrying their dead and wounded away. The LTTE's clandestine radio, "Voice of Tigers" said more than 300 government soldiers were killed while they lost 32 of their cadres, but this figure was disputed by the government spokesman in Colombo who said more than 300 Tigers were killed. Kilinochchi however was to remain virtually a ghost town after the Tigers withdrew, leaving the military in possession of the area.

**The Maradana bomb blast**: On March 5 it happened, when a runaway private bus with only the driver aboard exploded in the Maradana commercial area, leaving at least 32 people killed on the spot and more than 300 injured. Several shops in the area were wrecked. Reports said the 26-seater bus had been involved in an accident in the area and the police were chasing it when the explosion occurred. Suspicion naturally fell on the Tigers, but the motive of the driver who was himself killed, was not known. One and a half months later, on April 28, a powerful bomb went off at a telephone exchange run by Japan's Nippon Telegraph and Telephone company in southern Sri Lanka, cutting off 6,000 phones in the city.

**May 13, 1998 marked the first anniversary of the government's much-vaunted Operation Jaya Sikurui ( Victory Assured ) with the military objective remaining elusive even after tremendous costs in human lives and military hardware.** While the government's spokesman and media minister Mangala Samaraweera pledged to go "hell for leather" to get the 15,000 army deserters back in the army, the Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte was quoted by Reuters as saying "The government has decided on compulsory military service if ongoing attempts to bring back deserters fail".

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LTTE leader Velupillai Pirabakaran not given to making boastful claims or use hyperbolical language said, in marking the anniversary, that the Sri Lankan political and military high command miscalculated the military strength and determination of the LTTE. Based on the LTTE's strategic withdrawal from Jaffna peninsula and their non-engagement in the "Edibala" operation, Sri Lankan government entertained the theory that the LTTE was militarily weakened. This misconception led the army high command to believe in "an assured victory" and made them to issue time frames for the campaign. Ultimately the military establishment had to face humiliation. He said:-

> "Today is a significant day in the history of our national liberation struggle. It marks the end of a year during which we have resisted and fought against the biggest ever offensive operation launched by the Sri Lankan armed forces codenamed Jaya Sikurui. This operation has not yet come to an end but dragging on for a year though it was programmed for three months and began with much publicity and propaganda. **The battle has assumed historical significance as the longest military operation not only in the history of the Eelam war but also in the global history of armed conflict. ...Jaya Sikurui operation is not an ordinary battle, it has been the mother of all battles** that flared up on our soil. In this confrontation, the enemy mobilized all his strength and resources at his command. We fought against a formidable force of thirty thousand troops belonging to three army divisions with its special forces and commando units, supported in the rear by thousands of police and navy personnel. The enemy forces used maximum fire power by utilizing heavy artillery, tanks, supersonic bombers and fighter helicopters....."

Two incidents elsewhere were to jolt the military command in Colombo at the same time. The first was the death by a suicide bomber of Brigadier

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Larry Wijeratne in Jaffna and the second was an LTTE ambush of an army convoy at Chettikulam barely a few kilometers away from the Joint Operations Headquarters in Vavuniya. Thirteen soldiers, a policeman and a civilian were killed and 42 others were injured. The month of June saw heavy fighting both at Mankulam and at Kilinochchi. Following staggering casualties the government imposed press censorship on June 5, the third time since September 1995. But in parliament, on the 10th, Minister Ratwatte said that during the previous 10-day period the army had 208 troopers killed and another 1,536 wounded, 212 of them seriously. That admission made under censorship, made one suspect that the toll could have been even bigger.

**Kilinochchi and Paranthan army camps overrun**. The series of battle losses and reverses could lead to only one end – a major military disaster. That happened in September, when the LTTE recaptured the 15-kilometre stretch of military complexes at Kilinochchi and Paranthan not only inflicting heavy loss of lives to the army but also bringing into question any government hope of opening a land route to Jaffna. Because the attack took place at a time when Press censorship was in force, the casualty figures did not come to light immediately. But when they did, they were shocking enough. More than 3,000 government soldiers were believed killed, and a further 2,000 injured, almost half of them seriously. "Kilinochchi calamity": Worst debacle in 17 years" said the headline in the *Sunday Times* of October 4. ***"Kilinochchi Slaughterhouse***" said the *Sunday Leader* headline of the same date. "Kilinochchi overrun in Prabhakaran-led attack": LTTE's "Ceaseless Wave" swamps Lankan Army" said the *Indian Express* headline of September 30. "Kilinochchi debacle deepens dismay in Delhi" said another headline in the *Sunday Times* of October 18. While the Ministry of Defence said that 975 soldiers were killed or missing in action, the statement spoke of 717 LTTE cadres also being killed. But the Tiger radio, the Voice of Tigers said that some 240 of their cadres were killed, which included 150 female cadres. The Tiger offensive was launched to mark the 11th death anniversary of LTTE martyr Thileepan who fasted to death on September 26, 1987, in Nallur, Jaffna.

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The LTTE offensive code-named "Oyatha Alaigal II" (Unceasing Waves) began the early hours of Sunday 27 September. ("Oyatha Alaigal I" was what captured the Mullaitivu army camp on July 17, 1996, an equally bad blow for the government forces). Iqbal Athas of the *Sunday Times* who had access to the government military command pieced together a report, parts of which were censored. It said – (excerpts):-

> "....Soon after 2 a.m. on Sunday, mortars began to rain on the Paranthan defences and the Kilinochchi defence complex. At Kilinochchi, home of Sri Lanka Army's 54 Division and 543 Brigade, the mortar barrages were intense. When troops who were hit fell down, subsequent rounds took a toll of those who went to their rescue. .....Wave after wave of male and female LTTE cadres, taking advantage of the raining mortars, charged forward to defensive positions spraying bullets from their automatic weapons..... As dawn broke on Monday, troops deployed in "Operation Jaya Sikurui" moved out of their defences to advance in two flanks of the A9 highway. Their immediate task was to surround and recapture the strategic Mankulam junction, the town and its environs. Battles raged throughout day and night on Monday. At exactly 9.23 a.m. (?) on Tuesday September 29, troops walked into Mankulam much to the glee of the hierarchy in the defence establishment. For them, if what happened at Kilinochchi was bad news, the entry into Mankulam was not only good but most welcome news."

Talking of the death toll, a Iqbal Athas commented –

> "How many died during the attack on the Kilinochchi defence complex ? How many died after "Operation Jaya Sikurui" resumed on September 28? How many died after admission to hospital? Even the whole world knew the answers, most Sri Lankans did not. The censorship ensured that. The Government

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> claimed that 663 died....But the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) confirmed officially that it took charge of the bodies of 600 soldiers at Mallavi. They were carried in 25 lorries through Wanni roads and later handed over to the Army at Poovarasankulam on the Vavuniya-Mannar road. A further 74 bodies were handed over on Thursday. Thus, the total number of bodies handed over by the LTTE to the ICRC and later returned to the Army was 674."

In a Press release issued from the International Secretariat in London, the LTTE said apart from the numbers handed over to the ICRC there were many more bodies of Sri Lankan soldiers which lie abandoned among the more remote parts of the huge army base in Kilinochchi and in scrub jungles. They were combing the area to collect the bodies to return to their families in the south. "Badly mutilated or highly decomposed bodies which the Sri Lankan government would not accept are being cremated by the LTTE with full military honours", the statement said. The vast majority of soldiers whose bodies were not recovered were listed in Army records as "Missing In Action" (MIA) . "In the Sri Lankan context, the word MIA has become an euphemism for those feared dead", commented Athas.

Military sources were jubilant over the fact that despite the loss of Kilinochchi, Mankulam which was pivotal for the LTTE had come into Government hands. But Indian General Lt.Gen.A.S.Kalkat said in a telephonic interview to the *Sunday Times*: "Mankulam is nothing more than a place along the Kandy-Jaffna highway (A9). But Kilinochchi commanded the gateway to the Jaffna peninsula" (Oct.11). He added: "I do not think the LTTE cared much for Mankulam. No guerrilla force would want to hold on to territory for the sake of holding it. Pirabakaran obviously considered Kilinochchi more valuable strategically". General Kalkat gave his own assessment about the Sri Lankan military failures. "***The basic difference is while the Army believes in conventional warfare, based on the defence of fixed positions, the LTTE believes in mobile warfare. The battle is,***

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***therefore, between two mindsets – the defensive mindset of the Army and the offensive mindset of the LTTE…"***

**55 dead in Lionair plane crash**: While the post-mortem on the Vanni fiasco continued, there took place in the north, on September 29th, a human tragedy of a different sort. A Russian-built Antanov-24 plane owned by the private airline Lionair, carrying a full complement of 55 passengers and crew from Palaly to Colombo went missing off the coast of Mannar. All 55 were presumed dead. On board were 48 civilian passengers, practically all of them Tamils, four-member Ukrainian cockpit crew, two cabin crew members and one labourer. The plane disappeared 15 minutes after take-off. Speculation was rife that the plane was shot down by an LTTE surface-to-air missile, but military investigators said there was no evidence to indicate the plane was shot down. The fact that the LTTE had earlier warned two private airline companies not to ferry troops in their planes could have led to the speculation. Twenty four hours later, Lionair announced they were suspending Jaffna flights indefinitely.

Here is a catalogue of incidents that made the news in the year 1998.

**July:- Death for Krishanthi's murderers.** The Trial-at-Bar hearing the Krishanthi rape and murder case handed down death sentences to six of the nine accused on Friday July 3. Those found guilty were Lance Corporal Somaratne Rajapakse, J.M.Jayasinghe, G.P.Priyadarshane, Priyasantha Perera , D.M.Jayatileke and D.V.Indrajit Kumara. The judges also imposed jail terms of 20 years for rape and 10 years for abduction on each of the accused. D.G.Muthubanda, the sixth accused was released on that day while A.P.Nishantha, the ninth accused was released earlier. D.V.Indrajit Kumara, who had previously escaped from police custody on March 22, along with first accused Somaratne Rajapakse (who was later captured) was reported to be still absconding.

When the case was originally called before the Colombo Chief Magistrate, it was argued that the court in Colombo had no jurisdiction to



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hear the case. Accepting that contention, the magistrate ordered the accused to be produced before the Jaffna magistrate. Since the Krishanthi rape and multiple murder incident had evoked adverse publicity both locally and internationally, the Attorney General had directed, with the approval of the President, that the case be heard before a Trial-at-Bar consisting of three judges. On July 3rd, when the Trial-at-Bar judges asked the accused whether they had any statements to make prior to being sentenced, the first accused Lance Corporal Rajapakse shocked the court and those present by claiming that he could identify 400 other locations where bodies brought to the Chemmani army camp, were buried. "We did not kill anyone. We only buried the bodies given to us by our superiors", he said.

**Devananda attacked**: Two days earlier, the leader of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) Douglas Devananda was seriously injured when he was struck by an iron rod while visiting the Kalutara prison on July 1. He underwent a five and a half emergency brain surgery at the Colombo National Hospital and was placed in a ventilator in the Intensive Care Unit. President Chandrika was reported to have instructed the hospital authorities to keep her posted of Devananda's condition every six hours.

**August- LTTE seize cargo ship:** Armed LTTE cadres seized a Dubai-owned cargo ship off the northeast coast on August 14. The 6,000 tonne MV Princess Kash with 21 crew members, including 16 Indian nationals was reported to be carrying cement and general cargo from Colombo to Jaffna. While the LTTE released all the crew members to the ICRC, Sri Lankan Air Force planes bombed the ship suspecting that it was delivering supplies to the LTTE. A government statement said: "The location of the ship and the conduct of its captain gave sufficient cause for grave suspicion that he was acting in connivance with the LTTE to transport and deliver dangerous merchandise to the LTTE".

**September.- Mayor, Army Brigadier killed**: A bomb explosion in Jaffna's City Hall killed the Mayor, the area's military and police

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commanders and 17 others on September 11. The Mayor Pon Sivapalan, Brigadier Susantha Mendis, police superintendent Chandra Perera, six other police officers and an army officer were among those killed while discussing traffic arrangements in Jaffna, a city dotted by sand-bagged military checkpoints. Although no one claimed responsibility for the attack, the Defence Ministry said: "Initial investigations confirm that the LTTE is responsible for the explosion". The incident occurred four months after the Mayor's predecessor Mrs. Sarojini Yogeswaran was herself shot at her home on May 17, following rivalry between the TULF and the PLOT military chief Manickadasan.

**Eelaventhan and others acquitted in Madras**. Five Tamils, alleged supporters of the LTTE who were accused by the Q Branch of the Madras Police of having tried to procure medicines to a banned organization were all discharged by the Saidapet courts on September 8. The accused were – M.K.Eelaventhan (65) of Arumbakkam, Chennai, Mrs.Malinidevi Rasanayagam (58) of Sydney, Australia, K.Satchithanandan (57) of Maravanpulavu, Chavakachcheri, Doctor Sritharan, (32) an Indian national of Anna Nagar and Pandian Muralitharan (30) of Nallur, Jaffna. In acquitting the accused the magistrate said there was no evidence to prove that all five had engaged in any conspiracy to perform any unlawful act.

**October – Prison riot averted in Anuradhapura.** Timely intervention by the authorities at Anuradhapura jail averted a clash between Tamil prisoners and Sinhalese deserters from the army. There were 117 Tamil prisoners in the jail, including 76 LTTE suspects held without charge. When news had trickled in that the Tigers had overrun Kilinochchi army camp, there were shouts of jubilation among the Tamil prisoners who began shouting slogans amidst cries of "Jayawewa". Fifty nine army deserters who were housed in an adjoining area became infuriated and threatened the Tamil prisoners with death. With the situation becoming volatile, quick action by the prison authorities led to the arrival of the Commissioner of Prisons P.Paskaralingam and other high-ranking jail authorities from

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Colombo. All 117 Tamil prisoners were thereafter transferred to Kalutara, Trincomalee and Welikade prisons. The army deserters were transferred to the Bogambara prison in Kandy. (Virakesari, Oct.11)

**November:- Pirabakaran's offer of peace talks:** The month of November as everyone in Sri Lanka knew was the month of the LTTE's "Maveerar Week" (Martyrs or Heroes Week) from the 20th to the 27th. It was customary for the LTTE leader to end the week with his annual "Heroes Day" broadcast – an event which was eagerly looked forward to, - funnily enough,- as much by the Tamils, as by the Colombo political and military establishment, as well as the media, both local and foreign. On Friday, the 27th, the day after his birthday, Mr.Pirabakaran's speech evoked some special interest, when he offered "a negotiated political settlement if peace talks are mediated by a third party." Here are some excerpts from his lengthy speech:-

> "...The world has changed with the passage of time. Similarly, the politics of the world also has changed. But the politics of the Sinhala nation has not changed. It is unfortunate that the Sinhala politicians have not realized this fact. Fantasies that arose from ancient mythology have grown and developed into hegemonic ideas which exert tremendous impact on the Sinhala political and intellectual world. As a consequence the Sinhala nation lacks the ability to comprehend objectively the very basis as well as the rationale behind the Tamil issue and to deal with the problem humanely....."

> "We do not believe that Chandrika, who has become the author of the most blood-stained chapter in the history of oppression of the Tamils, will being peace to the country by resolving the Tamil national issue by peaceful means. She is a firm believer in a military solution and lives in an illusion that political conflicts can be solved by military means. She is also a prisoner of the Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinistic ideology....."

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**"We have not closed the doors for peace. We are open to the civilized method of resolving conflicts through rational dialogue. Since the Sinhala leadership lacks the political will and sincerity to resolve the problem we favour third party mediation for political negotiations. But we are not prepared to accept any pre-conditions for political dialogue. We want the political negotiations to be held in an atmosphere of peace and normalcy, free from the conditions of war, military aggression and economic blockades…".**

**Air Tigers?** The Martyrs' Week observances in the Vanni that year evoked keen interest for another reason. Eyebrows were raised in Colombo when the Tamilnet, the popular website quoting the "Voice of Tigers" broadcast said : The anti-aircraft unit of the LTTE was deployed all over Vanni to give protection to the Tiger cadres and the public who witnessed the "Maveerar" Day celebrations. The radio added, ***that the Air Tigers sprinkled flowers from two low-flying aircrafts on the LTTE's Heroes' Memorials and a large number of people witnessed the scene happily! !*** The report came after weeks of speculation that the LTTE had established an air wing; in fact there had been earlier reports of unidentified aircraft being spotted in the Vanni. The speculation now was whether they were helicopters or piston driven fixed wing planes?

As for the LTTE leader's offer of political negotiations with third party mediation, it was not expected that the government would respond positively. Some offers of mediation did come from British government sources, but the offers were ignored by the government. British Foreign Office Minister Derek Fatchett who held talks with both the President and Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremasinghe said he believed there was room for mediation, but denied there was ever any such invitation from the government. A visiting team of British M.P.s had also earlier offered their "good offices", but the government showed no interest. British Liberal Party M.P. Simon Hughes who offered to go to the Vanni for talks with the LTTE was angrily told by

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Colombo that he was unwelcome. There was some climbing down by the Colombo government however by saying that while third party mediation was ruled out, "facilitation" by a third party was acceptable.

As the year ended, the situation was one of uncertainty, politically as well as militarily. The highly publicized "Jaya Sikurui" offensive with the mismatched code name "Sure Victory" was quietly called off, but when a journalist asked army commander Rohan Daluwatte why the offensive was halted, he said the operation was not called off, only the code name had been taken away! (Roy Denish, Sunday Leader, Dec.13). Meanwhile, an ambitious recruitment drive in the Sinhala south to enlist 20,000 soldiers was already launched. Multi-billion rupee military procurement deals were put through, many of them shady deals through private brokers. The government seemed to be blissfully unconcerned over the worsening damage being caused to the country's economy. According to a study made by Colombo's Marga Institute, their researchers had found that the ongoing war had cost the Sri Lankan economy over US$38 billion.

The end of the year was not without its farcical aspect either. In order to take away the dented image of the armed forces over the failure of Jaya Sikurui, Deputy Defence Minister Ratwatte organized a Press tour to Oddusuddan to show that a new operation called "Rivi Bala" had captured the area from the Tigers. His entourage comprised all the big and the mighty – Army Commander Daluwatte, Navy Commander Cecil Tissera, Air Force Commander Jayalath Weerakoddy, Maj.Gen.Balagalle acting IGP Lionel Karunasena, 53 Division Commander Neil Dias... Under the headline – **Close shave for Ratwatte, service commanders,** Roy Denish told the story (some excerpts) of a December 6 misadventure, in the *Sunday Leader* (Dec.13):-

> "The journalists were packed into four Unicorns, locally built armoured personnel carriers. They were told to follow only after 15 minutes since the deputy defence minister was to hold

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talks with the troops at Oddusuddan and with civilians who had taken refuge at a Hindu kovil....The second after the minister stepped out (of the kovil) and boarded the BTR (a Russian-built armoured personnel carrier) a mortar fell near the kovil forcing the people to dive for cover. The army commander who had boarded the BTR with the minister and the air force commander immediately closed the hatch of the BTR and told the driver to speed off. ...Maj.Gen.Neil Dias who was injured by shrapnel ran into the kovil and took cover behind an idol..., outside it was pandemonium. The senior officers attempted to flee the area but the tyres of most of the vehicles were punctured. Some panic-stricken senior officers clung to the BTR in which the minister was travelling, speeding towards Nedunkerni with the headlights on..."

Commented Roy Denish : "Why did the government organize a media blitz without bringing the area under complete control? The LTTE had indicated that it could strike anytime, anywhere. It must have deployed a reconnaissance party at Oddusuddan. Before the government forces took over, there were more than 20,000 people, mostly farmers. After the forces took over 11,000 civilians had fled the area while another 600 are with the forces and have been placed under investigation. **Flying the journalists was a fool's gamble"**

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# Chapter 33

## 1999 : Vanni heartland in LTTE hands: Chandrika voted back to power

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# 1999 : Vanni heartland in LTTE hands: Chandrika voted back to power

In sending a New Year message to the country, "urging political parties, ethnic communities and religious groups to end their differences, and work towards peace in the strife-torn republic," President Chandrika Kumaratunga said : - *"There is no doubt whatsoever that this year would bring us peace, national harmony, equality and prosperity if we discard insular politically motivated ideas and uphold the goal of achieving development"( AFP*, Jan.1,1999). Those to whom this message was addressed could not have been faulted if they did not take the statement seriously. The speechwriter's sentiments were commendable, but it soon became clear that the government had not yet abandoned the dubious slogan *"Waging War for Peace"* that was coined after the peace talks failed in April 1995. Striking the same note was the Deputy Defence Minister who on January 7, declared in parliament during the monthly debate to extend emergency regulations:- *"I give an assurance to this House and the people that this government will finally reach the much-desired goal of defeating terrorism and usher in a new era of peace in this memorable year"!* ( *Reuters*, Colombo). Mr.Ratwatte was of course one who had already earned notoriety for giving such unrealistic deadlines.

Despite the humiliating loss of Kilinochchi to the Tigers the previous year, despite the abandonment of the much-expected "*Jaya Sikurui*" operation after a fruitless one and a half years, the end of the year saw Chandrika returned to power. Whether the mandate meant that the Sinhalese voters also

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subscribed to the government policy of waging war for peace or whether the attempted suicide attack on her during her election campaign, had also earned her sympathy votes was debatable, the margin of her victory being smaller than when she was elected first. However, the beginning of the year saw the President assume direct control of military operations through the setting up of what was known as the Joint Operations Bureau. The Bureau was to take over the planning and co-ordination of all offensive operations and was headed by its chairman, the retired four-star General Rohan Daluwatte . Daluwatte who earlier took orders from Deputy Defence Minister Ratwatte was now answerable directly to the President. It seemed to indicate that the President had lost faith in her uncle under whose command the entire Vanni debacle had happened, but as to what military advantages could accrue from this new mechanism was not very clear. It looked more a cosmetic innovation like changing pillows to cure a headache, the headache in this instance being "General" Ratwatte.

While there was a need to go for urgent military procurements, particularly transport planes, the government had been suffering a series of embarrassments in battling corruption over arms deals. Even on arms procurements on a government-to-government basis, the involvement of third parties had come to light. While the Ministry of Defence under Defence Secretary Chandrananda de Silva was entrusted with the task of monitoring the procurements under guidelines set out by the President, the service chiefs had the last word on the technical aspects. A move by the government to purchase three old models of C130 Hercules planes of Britain's Royal Air Force, later released to an American company, had reportedly not found favour with the Sri Lankan Air Force. The airworthiness of Russian Mi-24 helicopter gunships which had seen years of action in the Chechniyan war was also questioned. Delays and dilly-dallying over purchases led naturally to an inevitable stalemate in prosecuting the war until March, when the war resumed.

March 4 saw the government launch Operation "*Rana Ghosha*" (Battle

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Cry). Having given up the attempt to open the northern land route to Jaffna, it was decided to gain territory through the western flank of the A-9 highway. But the strategy seemed the same as usual, political rather than military, and to occupy territory and bring Tamil civilians under government control. If that was meant to win over the hearts and minds of the people, it had to necessarily fail, because any army occupation was bound to bring popular resentment. As for the LTTE, their intention was clear – to cause government troops as much destruction as possible and withdraw. While Operation *Rana Ghosha* recaptured several square kilometers of land, the Tigers retaliated with a devastating attack on the army's 212 Brigade Headquarters in Mannar on the 17th March. Iqbal Athas reported for the *Sunday Times* (March 21):-

> "Taking cover from positions a few kilometers away, they (the Tigers) showered 120mm and 122mm mortars on the camp at Thallady. During four and a half hours over 80 rounds fell, a few even in the Mannar town. The attack, senior military officials say, also saw the LTTE for the first time fire Multi Barrel Rocket Launchers (MBRL). They suspect the weapon is among military hardware LTTE has recently acquired and smuggled into the country through the east coast. The attack, intercept of transmissions had revealed, was carried out by the leader of the heavy weapons wing (Col.) Banu and his men"
>
> "The mortar fire began at 6.15 p.m. when dusk was enveloping the area and continued till around 10.45 p.m.... When it ended, 11 soldiers and three civilians were killed.... The rain of mortars caused severe damage running into millions of rupees. Stocks of artillery shells of assorted sizes, still on trucks and waiting to be unloaded, blew up in balls of flame. That drew flashes like lightning in the night sky. That caused secondary explosions to fuel dumps. Stores stocked with rations blew up. So were nine "Iron Horses"(Gun Towing Vehicles- GTVS) and four light vehicles".

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> "The shower of mortars at Thallady, highly placed military officials in Colombo said, came despite Military Intelligence warnings to the 212 Brigade... If that caused concern, exacerbating it were fears of how the LTTE became aware of the exact location where the mortar laden trucks were? Army Commander Lt.Gen. Weerasooriya will this week appoint a military court of inquiry to probe the incident. He is now awaiting a report from Maj.Gen.Shantha Kottegoda , General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the army's 21 Division....."

Phase 2 of *Rana Ghosha* began on March 22 with troops of the 53 Division and the 55 Division linking up at Palampiddy thus encircling a chunk of land of a few hundred square kilometers, without any resistance from the LTTE. The troops thereafter entered the Madhu Church area in violation of an assurance given by the President at a meeting with five Catholic Bishops at "Temple Trees" earlier. There had been an LTTE presence in the Madhu church area, but under the agreement with the church authorities, they carried no arms. There was a refugee camp and five international NGOs used to work in the Madhu area. The annual festivals became a neutral meeting point where the Sinhalese pilgrims from the South could meet with the LTTE cadres. With the entry of the troops, there was a fear that it could lead to a state of military confrontation.

Although nearly 30,000 refugees had made the shrine area their home, there was a total neglect on the part of the government, leaving the NGOs to look after the needs of the people. Because in the eyes of the government Madhu was not a "liberated area" even an ambulance donated by UNICEF to the Vidathelthivu Hospital had been lying idle at Vavuniya with the Ministry of Defence not giving it clearance. Dr.Jayalath Jayewardene, a UNP M.P. who had been conducting relief work in the area had been accused by the President of colluding with the Tigers. In February, he had organized an Eye Camp under the auspices of the Lion Club of Colombo North, SEDEC and the Sri Lankan Council for the Blind along with two visiting Professors of

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Opthalmology from the Sri Ramachandra Medical College and Research Institute in Chennai in India. The Eye Camp conducted over 100 eye operations and 1200 spectacles were distributed among the needy. Although Operation *Rana Gosa* had its political uses for the government, it was as a commentator said, full of "G*hosha"* (Cry) and little of *Rana!* (Battle). Dr.Jayewardene who alleged that the government had not sent even a bag of cement to the area the previous four years called upon the government to take immediate steps to reconstruct and rehabilitate the Shrine at Madhu .

If the purpose of "capturing" 835 sq.kms of wasteland west of Mankulam was to bring the Madhu Church under the writ of authority of the State, it seemed to be again a political decision timed for the Southern Provincial Council elections scheduled to be held in June. Moreover tying up troops to guard places could not have been good strategy for an army that was constantly short of its projected strength. Air Vice Marshal (retd.)Harry Goonetileke quoted an earlier remark by the Indian General, A.S.Kalkat who said :-

> " In counter insurgency guerrilla warfare, towns and cities and places are not objectives. Because the guerrillas or the militants will leave it and go away. It is like capturing an empty house. And when the Army finally leaves, because it cannot remain permanently, the guerrillas will come back to it. ...After capturing the city (Jaffna), they are caught with the situation of not being able to leave – like a blanket that wont leave its bed"

Harry Goonetileke added:-

> Apparently, 40,000 servicemen are tied down in the peninsula of approx 1070 Sq. kms. which is only about 4% of the entire land area of the North and East, and they cannot leave in the foreseeable future until a political settlement is reached, which is nowhere in sight, because the already unstable peninsula could be destabilized further as a result of sporadic LTTE strikes at a moment's notice....." *Weekend Express,* (April 10-11).

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One week after that comment, at midnight on April 18, Eelam War III entered its fifth year, apparently with no fresh rethinking on military strategy on the part of the government. It was on that day in April 1995 that a faxed letter signed by the LTTE leader addressed to President Kumaratunga reached the Colombo office of the ICRC. It said the LTTE was withdrawing from the peace process. Now, in 1999, none of the service or police chiefs of that time were in office. Gen Gerry de Silva, Vice-Admiral Mohan Samarasekera, Air Marshal Oliver Ranasinghe and Police chief Frank Silva had all retired. One could even say in cricket language, they had "retired hurt".

With less than nine months for the new millennium what were the prospects for peace or war? Even the political benefits expected from the "capture" of Madhu church evaporated in June with the JVP for the first time bagging seven seats in the Southern Provincial Council when in 1994 it had none. President Kumaratunga's Peoples Alliance (PA) which controlled the Southern Council with 32 seats saw its strength drop to 27, one short of a simple majority to govern the 55-member Council. The main opposition UNP took 21 seats. The JVP thus became the new power brokers at the expense of the PA. The result was seen as a litmus test for the government facing parliamentary and presidential elections the following year.

**Jaffna's Mass Graves: On June 17, two and a half years after 628 Tamil youths disappeared under army rule in Jaffna, excavations began at Chemmani, a 200-acre uninhabited low-lying area in Jaffna. It followed an allegation made by a Sri Lankan soldier Somaratne Rajapakse that nearly 400 civilians had been buried in mass graves at various sites in that area. He said he himself helped to bury those bodies under orders from his superiors. Rajapakse, along with four of his colleagues` had earlier been handed a death sentence over the rape and murder of Krishanthy Kumaraswamy, and the murder of her mother, brother and a neighbour of the family in September 1997.**

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At the magisterial inquiry held in Jaffna, 27-year old Corporal Rajapakse portrayed himself as a victim and described the manner in which his senior officers, whom he named, had taken people into custody, tortured them and killed them. Following that, Rajapakse left the crowded courtroom under tight security for Chemmani. At Chemmani, in the presence of Jaffna's Additional District Judge and acting magistrate M.Ilanchelian, Rajapakse pointed unerringly to a spot and the first signs of a buried body surfaced; a part of a knee with shreds of trouser clinging to it. But with fading light the digging stopped. Next afternoon, more bodies became evident; two skeletons.

It was another convicted soldier who escaped from custody at the Colombo magistrate's court who said :

> "Just as society hires butchers to kill animals for consumption and pay them a living , I too joined the Sri Lankan army and was paid for killing when those in command wanted me to kill in cold blood. Now why are you punishing me and humiliating me, while the officers who wanted us to kill are getting their promotions and decorations and are being lionized as national heroes?" - Quoted by Maarwan Macan-Markar (*Sunday Leader*, June 27).

Were those four convicted soldiers made the scapegoats, while the real culprits at the officer levels got away? That was the impression one gained from the open testimony given by those four. Rajapakse's family in fact had received two death threats after he named his superiors who he said were responsible for the killings.

It was left to that fair-minded journalist of that time, Marwaan Macan-Markar to give wide exposure to the events leading to the excavations and what followed. He wrote:-

> "Rajapakse's revelation in the magistrate's court was explosive. ...He spent close to an hour explaining in Sinhala

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> what had gone on in the area he had served. And he was not short on details, nor did he display any restraint in naming the officers in his sector, who, he said were responsible for the bodies in Chemmani. At one point, he said. "I can show you how people were arrested in Ariyalai, tortured and buried". There was another occasion when he described the torment that a youth named Uthayakumar had been put through: his body had been slashed with blades and he had been hung by his feet. **Then there was the incident involving Captain Lalith Hewa, who had taken into custody a married couple, raped the wife, and then killed her and her husband by beating them up with a mammoty and iron rods. In that gruesome instance, it was Rajapakse who had been ordered to bring the mammoty....** ***(Sunday Leader,*** June 20)

What happened to the rest of the excavations? State Counsel Yasantha Kodagoda told a Press conference at the military base in Palaly earlier that only four bodies would be unearthed. "We have the logistics to collect only four skeletal remains", he said. Nearly five months later, however, fifteen more skeletal remains were unearthed in September. French ambassador Elizabeth Dahan and the Swedish Embassy's Second Secretary Stima Karitun were reported to have visited the mass graves site in the company of Pathmini Rajadurai of the U.S. Embassy's political section.

Much was made of the fact that international observers were allowed at the excavation but no one could offer any reasonable explanation as to why it had taken so long to begin exhumation. On the contrary, an American forensic expert by the name of William Highlands of the Physicians for Human Rights organization was quoted by AFP (*Asian Age*, June 18) as even commending Sri Lanka as "*the only country to allow such a probe at a time when government forces were still locked in combat with rebels*". He added *"We are encouraged by the process...It is good that they have not rushed into it because that could perpetuate a crime by destroying the evidence!"*

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Ms. Ingrid Massage, the representative of the London-based rights group, Amnesty International said she believed there were many in the government forces who were keen to see that *"high human rights standards"* were established and maintained in the military. But she also admitted that some members of the security forces were unhappy about the excavations. The region's top military commander Lohan Gunawardene when asked whether the mass graves probe could affect troops morale, said: *"This is a convicted man saying various things. So let us see".(AFP* ,June 17*)*

**Disappearances:** President Kumaratunga was made aware of the spate of disappearances in Jaffna in November 1996 itself. TULF M.P. for Batticaloa, Joseph Pararajasingham sent her a letter dated November 21, 1996, saying: *"Disappearances while in army custody are increasing day by day in the army-controlled peninsula. I am reliably informed that during the last three months about 300 disappearances while in army custody are reported to have taken place".* He said six decayed bodies of Tamil civilians had been found on November 18 in the Thenmarachchi area. The bodies of those unfortunate civilians found in a decomposed state were discovered by local residents of the area. Four of those bodies were identified. The M.P. called upon the President to appoint a commission of inquiry. But no action was apparently taken.

On April 11, 1997, Amnesty International said in a strong statement from London:- "***That more than 600 disappearances can occur in one year despite the government's claim that it is addressing the problem is outrageous. This highlights the need for action to be taken now – to prevent these violations from continuing***" *(Reuters).* Tired and sick of government indifference, an urgent appeal was sent to United Nations Human Rights Commission president Mrs. Mary Robinson to pressurize the government to open the mass grave at Chemmani. The appeal was made by the relatives of the victims who banded themselves into an organization called "The Guardians' Association for Persons Arrested and Disappeared in the North". *"We are really annoyed and impatient at the attitude of the Sri Lankan*

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*government which is purposely delaying exhumation of the mass grave"*, they said. They also cast doubts about the impartiality of the Human Rights Commission set up by the government.

A few months of lull in the war front did not mean however the end of blood-letting in the country. Sporadic violence and individual killings became the order of the day. **The first sensational killing was of the high-profile Tamil academic and politician Neelakandan (Neelan) Tiruchelvam, (55) who was killed by a suspected Tiger suicide bomber on July 29.** Neelan, who headed a think tank in Colombo, - the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) - was a close confidant of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. He was driving from his home to the ICES when a lone suicide bomber with explosives strapped to his body flung himself at his vehicle killing both himself and Tiruchelvam. Although his death brought him several international tributes, particularly from the U.S., and from the majority Sinhalese, there was a near total lack of discernible sympathy at his death from among his fellow Tamils. The State-run *Daily News* said Neelan knew he was on the hit list of the LTTE and the police had asked him to change his daily routine to minimize the chances of getting killed. (*AFP*, July 30)

On August 4, a woman suicide bomber killed 13 elite commandos of the police and left 18 others seriously wounded when she set off a bomb near a Special Task Force truck that was carrying the commandos. The incident happened at Veppankulam in the Vavuniya district. The commandos were on their way to a nearby base when they were ambushed by the suicide bomber who was stated to be riding a bicycle. Two days later Tiger guerrillas ambushed a police bus in the heart of Batticaloa town, killing at least eleven policemen and seriously wounding 21 others. In a third incident for the month, the second-in-command of the Vakarai army base in the Batticaloa district was killed by a male suicide bomber. Elsewhere in Vavuniya, on September 2, the military wing leader of PLOTE Manikkadasan and his deputy K.Ilanko were blown to pieces by a bomb that went off in their base called "Lucky House".

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The killing on September 8 of a pro-opposition Sinhalese journalist Rohana Kumara (35) who was shot dead by unidentified gunmen at a Colombo suburb revealed the risks under which journalists were functioning in Sri Lanka. Later, in November, Ramesh Nadarajah, the editor of the pro-LTTE weekly "*Thinamurasu*" was gunned down at Wellawatte. Ramesh who was an M.P. elected on the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) ticket had earned the anger of his erstwhile leadership when the *Thinamurasu* which started life as an EPDP mouthpiece began to take a pro-LTTE stand.

**Debacle at Periyamadhu:** Encouraged by the "capture" of Madhu church the so-called Operation *Rana Ghosha* went into two more phases without any tangible benefits in the war against the Tigers. But the restive "Gen". Ratwatte was not happy. A fifth *Rana Ghosha* operation was the answer, he thought. A high-powered Security Council meeting in Colombo chaired by Ratwatte decided on September 12 as the date for the operation. According to Roy Denish who wrote the Defence File for the *Sunday Leader* (Sept. 19) army commander Lt.Gen.Sri Lal Weerasooriya had protested it was too soon to launch Battle Cry 5, to which the Minister had shot back:- *"Look Lal, if you cannot commence the operation. I will see that it is launched"*. As was to be expected the operation was a disaster. It was the worst debacle for the year, at least until then.

Let the Defence Correspondent of the *Sunday Island (*Sept. 19*)* take the story from there :-

> "Sunday September 12 was supposed to be the start of the operation. It turned out to be the end of it as well. The operation began with a massive pre-dawn bombardment by artillery and mortars. Then, as the sun rose, Kfir jets and Mi-24 helicopter gunships swooped in, bombing and strafing known LTTE defensive positions with 250-kg bombs, rockets, and machine gun fire. Then units of the 53rd and 55th Divisions, the best that the army has to offer, went forward on two flanks, towards the

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town of Periyamadhu, which is a junction of several jungle roads."

"But they walked into a hail of deadly accurate LTTE mortar fire. Within a few hours, more than 50 soldiers were dead, and hundreds wounded, almost all by mortar shells. By noon, the order was given to retreat back to the original positions. At around this time, one group of 15 soldiers became encircled by LTTE cadres, and was totally annihilated. The Tigers handed over the bodies through the ICRC on Wednesday. By dusk, Operation Rana Ghosha V was over. A total of 87 soldiers were killed, and 592 wounded ..."

"At the snail's pace that the army's crack divisions have been advancing this year, our grandchildren will be fighting this war", commented the correspondent." Is the government serious about finishing off the war? Or are top politicians and generals making so much money from arms deals that the government has adopted a policy of dragging out the fighting as long as it can?....Sixteen years is an extremely long time for a war to go on. Few wars in world history have been much longer **Either the government and the army don't have any strategy to win, or some people in key positions don't want it all to end"**

If the government did not know how to win wars, they did know how to bomb civilian settlements from the air! On the rebound from the Periyamadhu fiasco, within 48 hours, Sri Lankan Air Force Kfir ground attack planes bombed a crowded market place at Puthukudiyruppu in the Mullaitivu district killing 21 Tamil men women and children and wounding 48 others. The human rights watchdog Amnesty International slammed the government for the gross violation of humanitarian international law. "*Having bitten the dust at Periyamadhu, the government compounded its shame by bombing*

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*a crowded market at Mullaitivu",* commented Roy Denish of the *Sunday Leader* (Sept. 19). Foreign Minister Kadirgamar away in New York at that time said the casualties were the result of an accident.

In a tit-for-tat act of revenge, LTTE cadres went to the 31st Colony of Gonagala, Borapola border villages in the Amparai district and massacred more than double the number of Sinhalese men, women and children. Civilian massacres by both parties being inexcusable by any standards of human behaviour, worse was the double standards adopted by the Kumaratunga government. While the victims of the Amparai massacre were given Rs.10,000 as compensation and the costs of their funeral arrangements met by the government, the Tamil victims at Puthukudiyiruppu were ignored, on the claim that the Kfir plane, in the words of an Air Force senior officer, *"hit the right target as given by the Military Intelligence, and we do not know anything more than that"* (*Weekend Express*, Sept. 26-27). Meanwhile, on September 24, sixteen soldiers were killed and another 17 wounded when an army convoy came under a claymore mine attack on the Batticaloa-Trincomalee main road.

While the Sri Lankan army waging a fruitless war against the Tamils for fifteen years marked its 50th anniversary on October 10 with much fanfare, there was a touch of irony when an important guest on that occasion was a Tamil himself – 91-year old Anton Muttucumaru, the first army commander of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) after independence. He headed the then largely ceremonial army from 1955 to 1959 and had been living in Australia since then. One did not know what thoughts passed through his mind but he said, *"I am jolly glad to be back"*. Among other VIP guests were Pakistan's Army Chief of Staff General Pervez Musharraf (he was yet to seize political power), the Bangladesh Army chief and India's second-in-command Lt.Gen. V.P.Chandrashekhar. While Commander-in-chief of the forces President Kumaratunga pinned a medal on army chief Lt.Gen. Sri Lal Weerasooriya, nearly 2,500 soldiers and officers put on a drill at the Galle Face promenade under tight security. Ten days later, Colombo reports said Mrs.Kumaratunga

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had decided to go for early presidential elections, by year-end. But no one, least of all the President, was prepared for the shock news that was to follow on November 1.

"**Wanni falls to LTTE hands"** was the Page 1 headline in the *Sunday Times* of November 7. The report by the paper's "Defence Correspondent" said:-

> "**In a wave of attacks that began Monday (Nov.1) LTTE guerrillas have ousted security forces from their encampments and seized control of Oddusuddan, Nedunkerny, Olumadu, Ampakamam, Mankulam and Kanakarayankulam** This was after large groups of troops abandoned positions and retreated to Puliyankulam where heavy fighting was raging yesterday… Some of the fleeing soldiers shot at military police…. Military top brass who have positioned themselves in Vavuniya were fighting in two fronts yesterday – one, to halt the LTTE advance and the other, to prevent rebelling soldiers from leaving the areas….Reports reached Colombo (to say) that groups of outraged soldiers had attacked shops in Vavuniya town. In one instance they are said to have looted from a boutique. Military police were having a tough time dealing with the rebellious soldiers. Some of them who retreated from Mankulam had fired at two Military Policemen and defied orders given by a senior officer…."

In the same issue of the paper, Iqbal Athas filing his weekly Situation Report wrote under the headline - "**Years of gains lost in days" :-**

> "Military gains that took years, months and weeks to accomplish, with large human and material sacrifices, were lost in a mere ten minutes last Monday. More losses followed in the days later. That in short encapsulates the sad saga in the wilds of the Wanni this week, where one military debacle followed another, in a tragic and sometimes comical drama…..What



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followed during the next few days (after 1st November) will go down in military history as one of the darkest chapters in the ongoing separatist war. That it came just a little over six weeks to go for a Presidential election added to the confusion and heightened concerns…"

"High ranking military sources said Tigers had transported to Mullaitivu more than 60 tractor/truck loads of military hardware from Oddusuddan and neighbouring areas. They included small arms, ammunitions, anti-personnel mines, mortar shells, two armoured cars … LTTE leader had thrown in some of his "senior and trusted " confidantes to conduct "Operation Unceasing Waves 3". They were all led by **Karuna,** the one-time Batticaloa commander, and included Jeyam, Banu, Nagesh, Rabat, Theepan, Anton, Selvaraj and Balraj. Three leading women cadre leaders involved have been identified as Asha, Durga and Malathi. ……"

According to a report in *The Times*, London (Nov.4) "more than 1,000 government troops were believed to have been killed. Quoting a Sri Lankan military source in the capital, the report said *"government casualties were more than 1,000 dead and 1,500 injured*". On November 9, the LTTE announced that they had taken over a few more towns within the previous two days. They included Puliyankulam, 15 km. from the garrison town of northern Vavuniya, where over a lakh of Tamils lived. 1,200 square kilometers (460 square miles) of territory had come into Tiger hands. By the third week of November, the Tigers launched their second phase of Operation *Oyatha Alaigal 3* (Unceasing Waves 3) and swept through adjacent villages of Mannar wresting control of Iranai Illupaikulam, Palampiddy and Palamodai on the western flank of the A9 highway.

The town of Madhu with its famed church as well as the area around the pre-historic Sivan temple of Thiruketheeswaram also came under LTTE control. But in the process, the Madhu church area was hit by artillery shells,

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causing deaths, injuries and panic. Threatened by the advancing LTTE forces, the army advised the refugees to move into the shrine while falling back some seven kilometers from the shrine. A short while later there were explosions followed by screams of the dying and the injured. No one however claimed responsibility for the attack that killed 41 people and wounded 61. Among the victims were many children This fall of the western flank of the Vanni as well, virtually sealed government plans to open a second route to the beleaguered northern Jaffna from Mannar's western coast.

Meanwhile, Vavuniya town, the last government-held northern town was itself under tension following the LTTE's blitzkrieg offensive in which ten army camps were overrun and 11 towns were recaptured in just seven days. With Vavuniya town coming within range of LTTE artillery guns, loud thuds of artillery shells landing elsewhere were heard in the town itself. Fears of an impending assault on the town were fuelled by a 24-hour deadline set by the LTTE asking residents to leave parts of the town. Thousands of civilians fled the town despite government assurances that the town was safe. Once bustling Vavuniya became a ghost town within days. Vavuniya Government Agent Kandiah Ganesh estimated that nearly 20,000 people had gone to live with friends and relatives in Colombo and the southern areas. But with the Tigers soon announcing that they had aborted their attack plans after being pressured by international humanitarian organizations, the people returned and the town became a hive of activity again. Vavuniya which had a pre-exodus population of 1,03,600 housed one of the biggest government garrisons and also a well-laid out military airfield. With the threat to Vavuniya receding, the government announced in Colombo that the Presidential election slated for December 21 would go ahead as planned. Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera accusing the UNP of trying to derail the elections said that the LTTE attacks on army positions took place after a UNP "emissary" met rebel leaders in the northern Vanni jungles.

In his annual Heroes Day speech, LTTE leader Velupillai Pirabhakaran, who was riding high after his string of battlefield gains described President



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Chandrika's rule as the "*worst form of tyranny*". "*Though we stand today as a formidable force...and have the capability to liberate our homeland, we have not abandoned the path of peace*", he said. He urged the government to scale down the war, lift economic blockades on rebel-held regions and start peace talks with international mediation. In London, LTTE's political adviser Anton Balasingham was more explicit. Addressing a 6000-strong audience in Tamil at the Heroes Day function at the London Arena, he spoke of President Chandrika's offers to negotiate with the LTTE. "*Chandrika offered to negotiate with mediation three times, but stated unacceptable conditions*", he said. The Commonwealth Secretariat and Norway were suggested as possible mediators.

> "She wanted us to negotiate in secrecy, without the knowledge of the world, the Sinhala people or the Tamil people. We could talk in a foreign country out of public view. This secrecy is unacceptable to us and the Tamil people. Furthermore, Chandrika wants us to negotiate in secret while the war goes on. How can we sit and talk in a nice hotel in a foreign country while our people are being killed and starved?" he said.

December was to prove an eventful month, for the President as well as the country. Two days before the presidential election, on the final day of the election campaign, she had a narrow escape from an assassination attempt on her life. On the same day at a UNP rally at suburban Ja-ela, a former Chief of Army Staff Major Gen. Lucky Algama was killed by a hand grenade. The attempt on President Kumaratunga's life came as she finished addressing her final pre-election rally, and was proceeding towards her bullet-proof car. As she paused to answer questions from an Indian television crew, it was stated that a woman suicide bomber had attempted to get close to her but was prevented by the police. When the bomb went off, it was the bullet-proof car that had stood between the President and the suspected assassin and saved her life. Twenty one persons were killed in the explosion including the driver of the car.

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While it was widely assumed that the assassination attempt came from an LTTE suicide bomber, leaders of the UNP were non-committal on the perpetrators of the Colombo blast, they said they would not blame anyone for the attempt on the President until "evidence was shown". However, they claimed that they had "evidence" that linked the ruling coalition, the People's Alliance, to the attack on Alagama. *(Frontline*, India, Jan.7,2000). Ms.Kumaratunga underwent surgery to remove shrapnel from her face, with doctors concentrating on an injury just above her right eye. She may risk losing an eye, one surgeon said. Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera said: "*I don't think one has to have any doubts about her condition. She is in full control...If anything, she is bossier than ever"*. He added that there had been a "dangerous breach of security" at the meeting grounds that allowed the bomber to enter an area where the President's guards were supposed to have body-searched every individual. In a recorded address to the country broadcast over State radio, Ms.Kumaratunga said: "*I can assure you that I am not in any danger due to the injuries I received in this cowardly attack. I am well and shall be up and about very soon"* The day before the vote she appeared on television with a patch on her right eye and urged Sri Lankans to unite with her efforts to "wipe out terrorism".

While interest was focused on the Colombo bomb blast and the presidential election, there were new developments on the battlefront in the north. Government troops were getting pushed back by the LTTE from several camps guarding the Elephant Pass causeway. Military officials said government troops had moved back five to six km. on the northern side of the Elephant Pass army complex and 1.5 km. from Paranthan town to the south. Brigadier Sunil Tennekoon, the military spokesman said troops had to "*readjust their defence lines for tactical reasons*". A senior army officer in Colombo said:- *"There is no confrontation now, but they (the Tigers) are hammering almost all camps around Elephant Pass with artillery shells"(Reuters)*. The LTTE however claimed on December 19 that they had already captured Paranthan, after Sri Lankan troops withdrew from the town in total disarray. The Defence Ministry in Colombo admitted that the LTTE

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had also brought down a Mi-24 military helicopter that was providing air cover to government troops. Squadron Leader Tyronne Silvapulle, his co-pilot and two other airmen were all killed.

On December 22, President Kumaratunga (54) won a second term in office, but with a vastly reduced majority. She obtained just a little over 51 per cent of the votes, against the 50 per cent required. Her previous election victory in 1994 had brought her a record 62 per cent. The UNP's opposition candidate Ranil Wickremasinghe polled about 44 per cent of the total valid votes. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (The People's Liberation Front) which had high expectations received just over four per cent of the vote, less than the 6.12 per cent they received at the local elections. Although the country's election law required that voters go to the polling booth in person, Ms.Kumaratunga voted from her official "Temple Trees" residence after a helicopter carried her ballot paper there. It was announced that it was done with the consent of the other candidates.

Soon after the election, the *Sunday Leader* of the 26th carried a statement by the General Secretary of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress Kumar Ponnambalam who said:

> "As long as President Chandrika is in power there is no hope in hell that the war in the North and East can be resolved. This is clear by a statement she made when she said that the LTTE should be finished off. There is no way a problem can be solved by one party trying to squash the other party by the use of power. Any talk about peace under President Chandrika's government is total madness..." *(Early the following year, on January 5, Kumar was shot dead in broad daylight by a pro-government gunman)*

In an aggressive-sounding acceptance speech after the election, Ms.Kumaratunga said:

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> "Let all those who act in the name of hatred and terror in the North-East **and their supporters in the South be warned**; far from being weakened by fear of attack, our resolve has been incalculably strengthened by your cowardice. Let all those who aid and abet terror be warned, let those who by act or omission support terror be warned, let those who secretly or openly condone the path of violence pursued by the cowards of the LTTE be warned; the days of terror in this land are numbered and that number is small…". (*A full text of her long address was reproduced in the Sunday Observer of December 26*) .

The year was to end in a sad and tragic note, particularly for one Brahmin family in the islet of Punkudutivu in Jaffna. Sarathambal, a 20-year old mother of a five-year old daughter was brutally gang-raped and murdered on December 31 by men who came in uniform from the naval base in the islet. Her body which was buried after the final post mortem in Colombo on January 13 the following year was found to have several bite injuries! Among the earlier known victims of rape and murder were Krishanthi Kumaraswamy of Kaithady, Rajini Velautham of Manipay and Koneswary of Amparai. Violence against women however, had become, sadly enough, a common form of abuse, not only in war-torn North and East, but in all parts of the country.

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# Chapter 34

## 2000: Elephant Pass falls. Fall of Jaffna averted with foreign help

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# 2000: Elephant Pass falls. Fall of Jaffna averted with foreign help

As January 1, 2000 dawned, there were sounds of revelry in Colombo's five star hotels. The new breed of "war millionaires" both in uniform and dark suits were welcoming along with their crony friends, the New Millennium. There was all-night dancing. But, in the North and East, nothing had changed. There were only sounds of gunfire. It was not just the war. The country itself, Colombo included, was reeking of violence. The smell of Death was everywhere.

What happened on January 5 set the tone for what continued to bedevil the country throughout the entire year. While a suspected LTTE woman suicide bomber blew herself up near the Prime Minister's office, killing twelve people and wounding 28 others, a lone assassin shot dead the outspoken Tamil leader Kumar Ponnambalam in broad daylight at Wellawatte. In the North, the New Year's Day itself saw both the government troops and the Tigers incurring a total of at least 73 casualties in heavy fighting near the Elephant Pass military garrison. On January 8, at the high security prison in Kalutara there were clashes between Tamil prisoners and jailers, resulting in the death of two Tamil inmates. While 710 Tamils were being held at the prison under the Prevention of Terrorism Act without charge or trial for several years, 1500 more Tamils were held in Colombo in a massive search operation beginning January 6. Later in the month, hundreds of drunken soldiers went berserk at Seeduwa, smashing up restaurants, shops, vehicles

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and a privately owned hotel and assaulting civilians, following an earlier incident involving some army men and some civilians. Meanwhile, while Government was preparing to launch an enlistment drive for the army, army deserters detained at Potuhera and Panagoda escaped from custody by overpowering the guards and killing a policeman.

Amidst all these acts of violence and indiscipline, the President herself, in a two and a half hour chat on television and radio launched a vituperative attack on the media, naming well-known editors like Victor Ivan of *Ravaya* and Lasantha Wickrematunge of the *Sunday Leader.* Describing it as a "hate speech" the *Sunday Times* commented:- "*The country is tottering on the brink of anarchy, and the acrimonious politics that we see today is a good indication that this state is locked in a spiral of hate"* Victor Ivan had already complained of being threatened by the chief of the Presidential Security Division Nihal Karunaratne. It was clear that soon after Mrs.Kumaratunga's re-election, the Presidential Security Division (PSD) had become a law unto itself.

The month of January also saw a powerful parcel bomb that ripped through the Vavuniya Post Office killing at least ten people and injuring 40 others. Five soldiers were among the killed. The bomb destroyed the post office that was situated opposite the police station. While the identity of all those killed was not available, the injured included several army and police personnel. It being the 26th of the month, soldiers and policemen were in the process of sending money to their homes in the south and it was obvious that they were the intended targets. It was not clear how the bomb was activated, but police believed a timing device was used.

**Kumar Ponnambalam Assassination**: The Colombo Press (with the exception of the *Sunday Leader* and the Weekend *Express)* tried to play down the incident involving the assassination of Kumar Ponnambalam, which itself was significant, because it was one killing that had State terror written all over. The fact that even years after the killing the perpetrators were never

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brought to justice gave a clue that it was a pro-government gunman who was the assassin. A report by Amantha Perera in the *Sunday Leader* of January 9 said:-

> "....He (Mr.Ponnambalam) left the house (at Queen's Road) around 9.45 a.m. in the company of an unidentified person known only as Shantha. An hour later his body was recovered at Wellawatte. He lay dead at the wheel of one of his beloved Benzs. ....According to family members, a person using the name of Shantha had been calling Ponnambalam quite often of late. When another member of the family had answered the phone, Shantha, who spoke in fluent Sinhala, had replied that he was a friend of Ponnambalam's. On that fateful day also Shantha called Ponnambalam in the morning. After that he arrived at the Queen's Road residence and told a domestic that he was there to meet Ponnambalam. Family members told the *Sunday Leader* that the Tamil Congress leader was not to leave the house that day as he had planned to rearrange his room. However, Ponnambalam having talked to the man in his chambers left the house with Shantha not long after the latter's arrival. From that point onwards till the discovery of his body down a by lane off Ramakrishna Road, Wellawatte, the details are sketchy...."
>
> "There was no sign that Ponnambalam had struggled. His seat belt was still around his waist when the body was discovered around 11 a.m. The vehicle had been parked at the spot and the shots were fired while the vehicle was stationary. Police found two empty 9mm shells inside the car and believe that five shots had been fired ..."

Although an AP report dated February 1 said that a witness to the assassination had come forward providing a major break-through in the case, nothing more was heard about it. The witness, who was identified by

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the police only as a "youth" had seen the assailants walking away from the scene. The eye witness said the assailants seemed experienced with handling weapons. One of the gunmen had calmly tucked what looked like a revolver into his belt before walking away.

*"The clues are there, but no proper investigation"* said the Tamil Centre for Human Rights (TCHR) Paris, in a report dated 28th February calling for urgent action. The report said:-

> "With reference to our Urgent Action call – Ref.No.AE/02/01 of 5 January 2000, we like to bring the following matters to the concern of all human rights organizations, human rights activists and persons committed to promoting values of human dignity and worth."
>
> "**Our observations on information that TCHR has received since the assassination of the human rights defender Mr..Kumar Ponnambalam strongly indicate that a serious cover-up and manipulation by the investigators are taking place.** So far, no proper and serious inquiry has been carried out regarding this assassination. .....When a crime is reported in Sri Lanka it is the local police in whose jurisdiction the incident occurred that investigates along with the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). However, on the third day after the murder, this case was handed over to the Colombo Detective Bureau on the instructions of the President and the Inspector general of Police. This is highly irregular."
>
> "Even though the person named as "Shantha" referred to in our previous Urgent Action call had come to the family home, had sat and spoken with Mr.Ponnambalam before going in the car with him; even though the CID had been informed of this, no attempt was made to find out where he sat in the house, which chair he had sat on, or to take finger prints anywhere in

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Mr.Ponnambalam's home."

"According to a human rights lawyer and a good friend of Mr.Ponnambalam, there was an eye witness to this assassination! He is" Mr. X", a businessman in Colombo. "Mr. X" had gone in a trishaw to Ramakrishna Terrace via Marine Drive and Ramakrishna Road. As the trishaw turned into Ramakrishna Road he had seen a jet-black Izuzu Trooper jeep with dark tinted windows parked at the bottom of Ramakrishna Road. He had proceeded up the road and turned into Ramakrishna Terrace where he had seen Mr.Ponnambalam's car parked on one side to the left. He had seen a man seated in the left-hand front seat of the car and another man standing outside the window close to Mr.Ponnambalam. He had driven past them and had got off opposite No.7, Ramakrishna Terrace and had rung the bell/ knocked on the gate. There had been no reply from the house."

At that point he heard what he described as fire crackers. He had not taken special note of this, as it was the festive season. Since there was still no response from the house he had turned to go back towards Ramakrishna Road when he saw the individual standing outside the window where Mr.Ponnambalam was seated, tuck a gun that seemed like a revolver/pistol into his waist and pull the shirt over it. The other man had got out of the car by this time and they were both "casually" walking towards "Mr.X", that is towards Vivekananda Road. Then he found that a person had been shot dead inside that particular car. Immediately, he brought this fact to the notice of two policemen who said they had come to the area because they had received information that there was a suspicious vehicle parked that had been there for a long time. The policemen were referring to the Izuzu Trooper Jeep."

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**"In Sri Lanka, the Izuzu Trooper jeep is only used by the Security forces, especially by the Sri Lankan Army, Ministerial Security Division (MSD) and the Presidential Security Division (PSD)."**

"We feel it is important to note that the Government Analyst Department which examined Mr .Ponnambalam's car could not find any finger prints anywhere in the car. Even Mr.Ponnambalam's finger prints could not be found on the driver's wheel or anywhere else. The Government Analysts are reported to have checked the car on three separate occasions yet could not recover any evidence whatsoever!....."

Mr.Ponnambalam who was honoured posthumously by the LTTE leadership with the title of "Mamanithar" was also remembered in various countries of the world. In Canada, over 4000 Tamils gathered in an open arena despite freezing weather conditions to express their grief and outrage in front of the Ontario Provincial Parliament. In London, several hundreds gathered at a school hall in Croydon to pay homage to the slain leader and a candlelight vigil was held the same night outside the Prime Minister's residence. In Geneva, a memorial meeting was held at the headquarters of the World Council of Churches. In delivering an eulogy at the memorial meeting organized by the Ilankai Thamil Sangam, U.S.A. Wakeley Paul said:

" Mr.Ponnambalam was a hero among heroes....He remained in Colombo, the Sinhala capital. That is where he was nurtured. That is where he stayed, and that is where he fought them from. There, he was surrounded by danger every living moment. They feared him and have done away with him. They will never wipe him from our memory. Kumar, your name will be enshrined in history as the one whose battlefield was their doorstep. It hurt so much, they had to get rid of you. Your voice and your words will however reverberate from every Tamil temple and church throughout the globe....Goodbye great soldier"

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If January was a month bad enough from every point of view the succeeding months were to prove even worse. On the 17th February, the Tigers shot down a 212 Bell range helicopter of the Sri Lankan Air Force east of Elephant Pass. One of its pilots and a crew member were killed on the spot, while eight servicemen and the co-pilot sustained serious injuries.. In March two Antonov aircraft crashed within five days of each other. The first crash involved an Antonov-12 operated by Sky Cabs (Pvt). The ill-fated twin-engined plane returning from Bangkok on 24 March with a cargo of 18 tonnes of textiles had been unable to touch down at Colombo's Katunayake airport because of poor visibility. Eventually, when it tried to land, the plane crashed into the ground a few miles outside the airport perimeter. Six crew members, five of them Russian and one Sri Lankan died on the spot, along with two civilians when the plane ploughed directly into a house. Five days later, an Antonov 26 belonging to the Air Force crashed deep into the teak forest of Talawa in Anuradhapura with a more grievous loss of lives. The plane had exploded into a massive fireball, burning alive the 40 passengers and crew. Inside the ill-fated aircraft were 23 soldiers, 11 navy personnel, two policemen and the four-member all - Russian crew.

Earlier in the same month, the bloody Friday of March 10 ended in 20 deaths, and injuries to more than 40 others, when an alleged group of LTTE cadres exploded a bomb at the Borella-Rajagiriya junction. It happened on the route to parliament on the day when M.P.s were debating the monthly vote on extending the emergency. According to one witness resident in the area he had seen five or six suspected LTTE men lying in ambush and that he had complained to the Special Task Force (STF) personnel manning a checkpoint close by. In the fighting that ensued two police officers were shot dead. Soon after this, more LTTE cadres had appeared on the scene and began firing indiscriminately and exploding hand grenades According to another report (*Sunday Observer*, March 12) investigators believed that the intended target of the attackers was Deputy Defence Minister Ratwatte who was to travel back from parliament along that road, but the plan was foiled by police intervention. The attackers had then trekked along the Kelani Valley

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railway track and entered the nearby housing complex at Serpentine Road. Army and Air Force commandos had then stormed the building and in the process, six of the attackers were killed.

In the north, war clouds were gathering again in the Elephant Pass sector. Army intelligence had reported a heavy build-up of LTTE forces in the area, and government forces were alerted to a possible imminent attack on Elephant Pass. The area from Pallai in the north to Paranthan junction in the south was yet under army control despite several attempted incursions by the LTTE the past few months. But on 28th March, the LTTE resumed their deadly offensive code-named *"Oyatha Alaigal III"* (Unceasing Waves III). They launched a pre-dawn attack on the eastern coastal defences at Elephant Pass, blasted several artillery positions and seized more territory. For the 22nd month, all news items relating to military operations were subject to censorship. Nevertheless, Iqbal Athas of the *Sunday Times* (April 2) was able to report that seven Sri Lankan officers and 114 soldiers were killed during six days of heavy fighting. More than ten thousand civilians were displaced from the areas of Thenmarachchi East.

At an emergency meeting at *Temple Trees* in Colombo, the President was reported to have ordered the commanders of the army, navy and air force to remain in the north until the fighting in the Elephant Pass sector was halted and the situation brought under control. It turned out to be a futile order. The President too left on a private visit to London thereafter to join her daughter Yasodhara who unfortunately happened to celebrate her birthday around the same time the Tigers were about to overrun Elephant Pass. It was later revealed that even Gen.Ratwatte who was not seen either in Colombo or anywhere near the battlefront was holidaying at the President's Cottage in Nuwara Eliya with his family and immediate family members under heavy guard and with a helicopter at his disposal (Deshavimala, *Sunday Island*, April 30)

**The Fall of Elephant Pass:** On the 21st April, the LTTE overran the Elephant Pass army camp, with the rebels claiming that over a thousand

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Sri Lankan troops had been killed while the rest "fled in disarray". Military officials in Colombo admitted that troops had "tactically" pulled back their defence lines north of Elephant Pass and the Iyakachchi camp, the final bastion protecting the military base. The LTTE claimed further that their fighters were now in full control of the Iyakachchi–Elephant Pass sector and have "amassed a huge haul of heavy weapons, ammunition and military vehicles". The giant Elephant Pass camp was manned by some 17,000 troopers belonging to two divisions of the Sri Lankan army. Unconfirmed reports said a large number of troops were still unaccounted for and were feared trapped behind LTTE lines (*Reuters,* April 23) Faced with the most stunning defeat since the beginning of the war, and the consequent shortage of manpower, the government called all reservists to active service.

Defence columnists of the Colombo Sunday papers who described every previous fall of army camps – Mankulam, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu - as "debacles" and "disasters" were finding it difficult to find the word to describe the fall of Elephant Pass. The *Sunday Leader* sub-editor could only think of one headline for the Roy Denish column (April 30). The headline merely said – ELEPHANT PAST. Uncensored portions of his column said: *"More than ever (before) Eelam seems a reality", a newspaper screamed, just before Tiger rebels forced government troops to abandon their positions at Elephant Pass, the country's most valued real estate in northern Jaffna peninsula. That was not all. Another newspaper called for military intervention by a third country to fight the rebels, now marching slowly towards Jaffna to re-capture that land they lost to the government in 1995,"* commented Roy Denish. He wrote:-

> "Last week, the Tigers just proved once again that no target was too big or too impossible...(Censored) Velupillai Prabhakaran, the author of multiple re-writing of Sri Lankan history, on April 21, added another black chapter to the saga when his cadres took control of the sprawling military complex located on the gateway to Jaffna... (Censored) He sent his



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artillery chief lieutenant Colonel Bhanu to hoist the flag of the state of Eelam on the very same soil where soldiers stood to attention when the Lion flag was hoisted...."

The fall of Elephant Pass led, predictably, to gung-ho reactions in the south and a lot of sabre-rattling. The birth of a new party called *Sihala Urumaya* was announced, with its national organizer Champika Ranawaka calling for the annihilation of Velupillai Prabhakaran and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Party President S.L,Gunasekera addressing the inaugural meeting of the party said: *"At this critical moment in our history the PA-UNP and the leftists are kneeling in servile abjection before the terrorists and their foreign godfathers to betray our beloved motherland and its sacred soil to the terrorists"*. Close to 2500 people, including hundreds of Buddhist monks and surprisingly, former national cricket captain Arjuna Ranatunga, were reported to have attended the meeting. Such was the feeling of resentment and despair following the fall of Elephant Pass that a journalist pointedly asked Lt.Gen.Weerasooriya at a news conference, *"While you were serving as Commander of the Army, you have lost the Vanni area. Now you have lost Elephant Pass. Don't you feel that you should resign and go home?"* to which the General with his customary modesty replied: "*You can't solve problems by resigning. If I am told to go home, I will go. I did not ask for this post*". An "expose" in the *Sunday Leader* of April 30 however laid the entire blame on the Elephant Pass debacle on the Defence Ministry.

Widespread coverage was given in the British Press to the northern developments. ***"Sri Lankan government panics as Tigers prepare for victory"*** said *The Guardian* headline of May 5. The report by Luke Harding said :-

**....Most analysts now believe it is only a matter of time before Jaffna falls. It could be days. After a two-day pause the Tigers are expected to renew their assault, by attempting to shell the runway at Palali, the government's only functioning**

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**airbase. They need to advance only three miles more before the airstrip comes into range of Tiger heavy artillery. If the airport is destroyed, the government has little choice but to evacuate.** Harding also quoted Iqbal Athas who said: "It is a hopeless military situation. In such a situation there is no choice but to withdraw. They can't hold it. The troops have been fighting for 11 days. They are exhausted".

"The deepening crisis in the north has prompted Sri Lanka's government to seek help from outside, and to embark on a desperate quest for more heavy weaponry. **Diplomatic relations were hastily resumed with Israel yesterday, a country which has supplied Sri Lanka with helicopter gunships. But crucial naval assistance from India has not been forthcoming**. India's Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh ruled out intervention in the conflict. Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, who had flown to New Delhi to meet the Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee left empty-handed.... The defeats in the north have left Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese population stunned, and have prompted a wave of national soul-searching. Blame is being heaped on the deputy minister of defence Anuruddha Ratwatte. They attribute his rise within the armed forces to the fact that he is President Kumaratunga's uncle.... "This is a bloody war", one senior military officer said last night, shaking his head, "It is a war created by politicians. It is completely pointless".

*TIME* magazine, (Anthony Spaeth with reports by Waruna Karunatilake/ Colombo and Meenakshi Ganguly/New Delhi), May 15, commented :-

"Sri Lanka's ability to hold the peninsula is doubtful: 10,000 government soldiers failed to defend Elephant Pass from 4,000 Tigers, and thousands of troops retreated northward. The

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> government doesn't have enough ships or tranpsort planes to evacuate its forces before the Tigers start their assault. But the LTTE is waiting to see if President Chandrika Kumaratunga can get the troops out before a wholesale slaughter ensues."

The magazine went on to quote this writer. It said:

> "I don't think the LTTE wants to kill all those soldiers", says Subramaniam Sivanayagam, editor of the pro-LTTE monthly *Hot Spring*, which is published in London. "But what they do want is the troops out of Jaffna"

While Colombo banned all live radio, TV broadcasts, the Tigers announced on May 10 that a lightning offensive on three flanks had brought them closer to Jaffna town. A statement issued by the LTTE London office said :-

> "In a multi-pronged offensive thrust, the Tamil Tiger commando units stormed into the Sri Lankan army's defence positions in the early hours of Wednesday at Navatkuli, Ariyalai and villages in the outskirts of Jaffna town inflicting heavy casualties on the Lankan forces". A government statement issued in Colombo the following day said Air Force jets had on Thursday pounded LTTE targets at Ariyalai and Pooneryn."The pilots confirm that the terrorist bunkerline at Ariyalai was completely destroyed..".

In New Delhi, Prime Minister Vajpayee was quoted by *Asian Age* (May 12) as telling reporters :

> **"India will not recognize Tamil Eelam even if LTTE guerrillas drive out the Sri Lankan army from Jaffna town. He made it clear that India could intervene only if both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE pressed for it and said there would be no change in the government's stand even if Jaffna fell into the hands of Tamil rebels".**

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An LTTE statement the same day said, "*The advancing combat formations of the Tamil Tigers are now positioned one kilometre from the Jaffna kachcheri (district government headquarters), the administrative centre of the city*"

With Israeli Kfir jets involved in incessant pounding of LTTE positions, with more Israeli jets on the way, it was clear that the LTTE had suffered very heavy casualties even as they were on the brink of victory. While the LTTE offensive was stalled for a few days, the multi-billion arms procurements of the Sri Lankan government were proceeding apace. *The Hindu* of May 12 in a front page report headlined – "Israeli jets for Sri Lanka" said Sri Lanka has acquired new (censored) from Israel and is awaiting a load of arms from Pakistan. The report also said that some containers of Israeli arms and equipment have been landing in Colombo. …It also reported that a Pakistani ship with arms on board is on the way. Details of the armour being delivered was disallowed but the censor permitted the publication that analysts said that the Pakistani consignment (later found to be multiple rocket launchers) would strengthen the army's ability to counter the LTTE edge. It further said Sri Lanka has also contacted the Czech Republic for deliveries intended for early induction. The military equipment that has been procured "has now begun pouring in", the report added.

While the Tigers renewed their offensive on May 16, after a three-day lull, it was announced in Colombo that Lanka's defence spending had skyrocketed to $880 million. The defence budget for 2000 was earlier set at $701.6 million, or just less than five per cent of gross domestic product. Foreign Minister Kadirgamar who held talks on arms purchases with seven countries that included China, Britain, Pakistan, Israel and the Ukraine declined to say what deals had been struck. *"There is no such thing as free lunch and there are no donations in the hardware game, we're paying for it, and paying very dearly"* he said. Becoming more loquacious, Mr.Kadirgamar also said Israeli technical personnel could be asked to train Sri Lankan troops on the front-line in the operation of weapons, but said there was no question of them playing a combat role.

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> **"I can't rule that out because of the equipment we are seeking from them is of such a nature that only they understand how it is worked, then it would be logical I think to expect or to ask them to provide technical assistance. But if you are thinking in terms of Israeli assistance for combat purposes the answer is, absolutely not"***(Asian Age,* May 17, quoting *Reuters, IANS)*

Did the commander of the Sri Lankan armed forces General Daluwatte pay a secret visit to India around the same time? In a Chennai report datelined May 18, R.Bhagawan Singh said the General left Chennai for Colombo after a two-day trip shrouded in mystery. He wrote:-

> "While no official version was available about the purpose of the general's visit, which included a quick hop to Bangalore, Cochin and Thiruvananthapuram, the media was led to believe that he was on a pilgrimage with his family to seek the blessings of Satya Sai Baba at Whitefield near Bangalore – which is hard to believe considering the crisis in Sri Lanka due to its civil war with the LTTE.... It is speculated that Gen.Daluwatte could have met senior Indian defence personnel during his quick trip and discussed the logistics in Indian forces protecting the supply lines to the beleaguered Lankan troops in the peninsula, and also, if need be, evacuating them out of Palaly and Kankesanturai..." (*Asian Age*, May 19)

Subsequent reports confirmed that General Daluwatte did discuss possible evacuation of Sri Lankan troops out of Jaffna, although the Sri Lankan government had not made any formal request until then, and was hoping that such eventuality might not arise. The *Asian Age* of May 24 quoting the paper's correspondents in New Delhi and Bangalore said :-

> "India said it was ready to evacuate about 30,000 Sri Lankan soldiers trapped in the Jaffna peninsula but that Colombo would

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> have to make a formal request for such assistance and the "proper conditions" would have to exist. "If evacuation is desired obviously proper conditions will have to be there", said national security adviser Brajesh Mishra after the Cabinet Committee on Security met at Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's residence to discuss the Lankan situation. Mr.Mishra refused to elaborate on the proposed "conditions"...Asked if a cease-fire in Jaffna would be a pre-condition for India to evacuate Lankan soldiers, Mr.Mishra parried the question, saying, "I am not going to spell it out".

Under the headline – **"India steps into Lanka Swamp"**, the report further said:-

> "Naval boats with the Southern Command have been ordered to two-knot cruise speed, the official indication of a high alert, sources in the defence ministry told *The Asian Age* in Bangalore. Defence Minister George Fernandes, on a 'private' visit to Bangalore, held talks with senior officers of all three services to discuss the logistics of a bailout and relocation of Lankan troops. According to defence ministry sources in Bangalore, both the Navy and the Air Force could be pressed into service to evacuate the Lankan troops and to re-route them to various parts of Sri Lanka through Navy and Air Force bases in Kochi, Thiruvananthapuram, Bangalore and Mangalore. A news agency quoted a Navy source as saying the Navy needed 24 to 72 hours for rapid mobilization...."

While the Sri Lankan government was playing for time and the Vajpayee government kept dilly-dallying over the issue, (with its Tamil Nadu allies, the DMK and the more vocal Vaiko of the MDMK and Ramdass of the PMK opposing any kind of Indian assistance to Sri Lanka) the U.S. government which never at any stage of the Sri Lankan developments took its eye off the

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island was quick to step in. U.S. Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering was off to New Delhi to discuss the Sri Lankan situation with Indian Foreign Secretary Lalit Mansingh and thereafter flew to Pakistan. The responses for military help from Israel and Pakistan were equally quick. What Pickering told India was not known, but certainly he could not have favoured the idea of Sri Lanka being humiliated by India helping to rescue Sri Lankan troopers from Jaffna. Anyway, with India pondering over various security implications, the time to act decisively slipped away. Israel and Pakistan, with obvious U.S. backing made sure that there was no more any need for any "rescue operation".

(In Colombo, there was an incidental drama involving the Government and the *Sunday Leader*. In its issue of May 2, the paper carried a satirical Page 1 lead item meant to be a "spoof" on the government's strict censorship of all news relating to military developments. Writing under the strap line –*"**War in Fantasy Land**"* and the headline *"**Palaly NOT under attack**"*, the SL writer Roy Denish said, *"Heavy fighting was NOT raging in northern Jaffna peninsula and Tigers were NOT pounding Palaly air base with heavy artillery and mortars for the third consecutive day. In the so-called attacks, at least 14 soldiers were NOT killed."* The Chandrika government was not prepared to take any more taunts from the paper and promptly banned it for six months!)

On June 7, for the first time in the 17-year war, the Government observed a "War Heroes Day" in Colombo. Temple and church bells would ring out, after which every one would stop work for two minutes. In an emotional address, in Sinhala, televised live by the state television, President Chandrika Kumaratunga said: -*"We want to finish the war soon as the country has spent a lot of money and continues to spend more*". She added that she fervently hoped that the valiant soldiers who were fighting the battle against all odds would finally put an end to LTTE's terrorism.

"We have finally come to an understanding and are reaching

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> a consensus among all political parties to forge ahead with a new constitution, which will spell out a new vision for nationhood and new idea of the state based on multi-ethnicity, devolution of power and functional democracy", she said.

She appealed to the people to understand the reasons for hiking the charges of essential services as there was no alternative but to divert resources to win the war.( *Asian Age* ,June 8, quoting *PTI* and *Reuters).* Commented *The Economist,* London (June 10), *"It was a measure of Mrs.Kumaratunga's unpopularity that the ceremony was largely ignored. Life went on as usual in most of the country"*

On the same day, as the War Heroes Day was being observed, a huge explosion at a government rally killed Cabinet Minister C.V.Gunaratne and 21 others and at least 60 more people. The minister, a close confidant of the president, had been mingling with the crowd during a procession of the ruling People's Alliance. The minister's wife was among those who were critically injured. Body parts and shattered glass covered the blast site, one km. from the Ratmalana airport, used by the Sri Lankan Air Force. The government blamed the LTTE for the attack and urged people to remain calm.

With the LTTE's threat to take back Jaffna receding, following a massive influx of military hardware for the army and air force, the Government turned its attention to political matters. On July 31, the Cabinet approved a set of constitutional reforms aimed at powers devolved to regions, including one administered by Tamils. But even before the draft proposals were made known to the country, hundreds of Buddhist monks took to the streets opposing any reforms that would eventually lead to a division of the country. When parliament met on August 7 to debate the proposed new constitution, thousands of heavily armed security men patrolled the streets of Colombo. More than 1,000 supporters of the leftist People's Liberation Front wearing black bands held silent demonstrations while some monks began a hunger strike in protest.

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Chairman of the United National Party Karu Jayasuriya alleged that that the Government, lacking the two-thirds majority to push the new constitution through parliament, was offering Opposition M.P.s houses and cars to secure their votes. Some opposition M.P.s said the bidding had reached dizzying heights of up to $750,000! Several ruling party M.P.s were reported to have checked into the safety of five-star hotels as monks stepped up pressure on them to vote against the draft bill. With the four Buddhist chief priests of the Malwatte, Asgiriya, Amarapura and Ramana sects declaring that the proposed constitutional reforms would be *"harmful to the land, race and Buddhism"*, and warning the government that *"If you do not respond to the request you will have to face the consequences that may come from the Sinhala Buddhists of the country*", the constitutional bill was as good as doomed. The voting on the bill was shelved.

**Mrs.B. steps down**: Mrs.Srimavo Bandaranaike, the mother of the President who held a ceremonial position as Prime Minister in her daughter's government, stepped down on August 10, enabling the daughter to reshuffle the Cabinet. 84-year old Mrs.Bandaranaike had made history 40 years earlier, on July 21, 1960, by being the world's first woman Prime Minister. Ratnasiri Wickramanayake who was sworn in, in her place, as Prime Minister set the tone for the government's thinking by saying that it was *"past the stage"* for any talks with the Tigers. "*The government is committed to eliminating terrorism from the country by war"* he declared. On August 24, the parliament's six-year term ended and elections were announced for October 10. But winning the political battle needed territorial gains on the ground – that being the routine thinking on the part of the government, - a new offensive code-named "Operation *Rivikirana"* was launched on September 3. Some were of the view that the offensive be code-named *"Operation Rolling Thunder*" to underscore the heavy MBRL artillery fire and mortar fire that was to be unleashed, but ultimately the name "*Rivikirana"*( Sun Rays) prevailed. The objective was to oust the Tigers from the Thenmarachchi area of Jaffna occupied by them.

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Encouraged by the massive haul of weaponry that had flowed in from various countries, and preceded by a joint US-Sri Lanka military exercise in two locations in the south, the Sri Lankan army and Air Force went into battle brimming with confidence. Iqbal Athas, reporting for the *Sunday Times* (Sept. 3) wrote:

> "Multi-Barrel Rocket Launchers (MBRLs) spewed out hundreds of shells, second after second. Artillery and mortar shells rained in rapid succession. They were accompanied by Rocket Propelled Grenades. Low flying interceptor jets fired on suspected Tiger targets".

As 5,000 troops from the Army's 51 and 53 Divisions kept pounding the Chavakachcheri area, the Tigers exploded a powerful landmine in the Mannar district that left 15 airmen dead and seven wounded, some critically. Meanwhile, all was not well with Operation *Rivikirana.* Within one week, Iqbal Athas was to report (Sept.10) :-

> "Just before crack of dawn last Sunday, troops broke out from two flanks, as air, artillery and mortar attacks were directed at LTTE positions in support of the advancing forces. One thrust was from their defences at Sarasalai and neighbouring Nunavil..Troops were to advance in a south easterly direction through marsh land towards the A-9 (Jaffna-Kandy highway )at Chavakachcheri. Troops of the 53rd Division including commandos, Special Forces, the Air Mobile Brigade and twelve other battalions were involved in the operation. .....Towards noon, they had advanced well over one and a half kilometers. **It seemed the Tiger guerrillas allowed them to move in. Suddenly, sporadic guerilla artillery and intense mortar fire began to rain on the advancing troops causing heavy casualties. Many were killed and severely injured. These developments forced the troops to revert to their original positions.**

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Quoting some "highly placed army sources," Athas said the final death toll of the army, both those who died in the battle and those who succumbed to their injuries whilst being evacuated or in hospital was close to 200. The evacuation of the large number of wounded caused serious problems. "Operation *Rivikirana"* was called off, some eight hours after it was launched, due to the unexpectedly high casualty count. Athas wrote (*Sunday Times*. Sept.10) :-

> "The short-lived military offensive turned out to be the hot topic of discussion at Tuesday's (Sept 5) National Security Council chaired by the President. Needless to say the outcome of the offensive disappointed President Kumaratunga, who is also the Commander-in-Chief. She had personally ensured that all requirements of the security forces were met at tremendous cost to the state. She wanted to know what went wrong.
>
> Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte, who had visited Jaffna to personally ensure all arrangements were in place for the successful conduct of the operation, was also an angry man. He also sought to know what went wrong and who was accountable for last Sunday's fiasco. The remark drew a polite but sharp response from Chief of defence Staff, General Rohan Daluwatte, now the top most military officer responsible for planning and executing military operations. He said if it was felt he was accountable, he was ready to put up his papers for retirement. Minister Ratwatte was quick to point out that he was not on a personal witch hunt but was only highlighting the need for some form of accountability in situations like last Sunday's. The meeting ended on a heated note…".

Chavakachcheri, the second largest town after Jaffna city that boasted of a population of 100,000, was now leveled to rubble by the army's liberal use of the imported MBRL rockets and mortar bombardment. It was virtually

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a ghost town with the ruined shells of buildings. There were no civilian casualties because there were no civilians, all of them having departed during the LTTE offensive in May. Into this war-ravaged town, walked in the Sri Lankan army under the new code name "Operation *Kiniheera*" recapturing the town within four hours, with only some token resistance from the Tigers. Having clamped a strict censorship of war news for several months, the government now flew in two groups of newsmen to army-occupied areas in Jaffna, in the hope that it would help in favourable publicity, in time for the October elections. In Colombo, as part of the election rhetoric, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake declared at an election rally in the Nuwara Eliya district that Elephant Pass would be under government control by election day October 10. But it turned out to be mere platform bravado.

On September 26, the LTTE launched Phase IV of Operation *"Oyatha Alaigal"* (Unceasing Waves) forcing government troops to withdraw two and a half kilometers to the rear of their main defences. An LTTE statement from London on September 27 said:-

> "One hundred and fifty Sri Lankan troops have been killed and more than 500 injured in the heavy fighting that flared up yesterday evening and continued throughout the day today in the Muhamalai-Kilaly sector of the southernmost army defences in the Jaffna peninsula...."

With that withdrawal back to the second line of defences, government yielded 30 square kilometers. After pushing the troops to the rear, the Tigers launched artillery attacks on the security forces' northern command area, some of the artillery fire hitting even the outer fringes of the Palaly airfield. As heavy battles continued for the fourth day, the LTTE radio "Voice of Tigers" asked civilians to move out of Mirusuvil, Kodikamam, Kachchai, Manthuvil and Varani. On October 5, the LTTE attacked the army defences at Nagarkovil killing one officer and seven soldiers. As the 33-day old campaign for the parliamentary elections, plagued by mounting violence

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ended on the 8th October, there was nothing to show by way of any military success in the north.

Apart from the costly army offensives in the north, the month of September saw a mysterious tragic incident in central Sri Lanka. A Sri Lankan Air Force helicopter carrying a senior Minister and leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress M.H.M.Ashraff, and 14 others, crashed near Kadugannawa on September 16, killing all on board. Apart from the Minister, other victims of the crash were nine of his supporters, one security officer, and five members of the crew. All the bodies were charred beyond recognition.

The bitterly contested October 10 elections resulted in all-round disappointment, to the President, to the UNP and all those who hoped that it could lead towards the road to peace. The outcome was virtually a hung parliament with President Chandrika, possibly able to cobble together a wafer-thin majority with the help of her anti-Tiger Tamil ally, the EPDP with five seats. The President's party, the Peoples Alliance had 107 seats in the 225-member House, with the UNP faring equally badly with 89 seats. **Adding to the gloom on the day of the election was the death of the President's mother, Srimavo Bandaranaike, who after voting died of a heart attack**. Nearly half a dozen people died more violently that day, bringing the death toll for the parliamentary campaign to more than 70. *The Economist*, London, in its issue of October 14th made the wry comment:- *"Sri Lanka's voters have produced a parliamentary muddle that allows for plenty of deal-making among the parties. Their leaders are gathering for Mrs.Bandaranaike's funeral, set for October 14th. Mourning may take a back seat to maneuvering"*

What of the conduct of the elections itself? Stuffed ballot papers, threats of intimidation, fear of masked goon squads parading openly through the streets, were part of the polling scenario. The Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) received reports of serious election violations, ranging from murder, threats and intimidation of polling agents and voters, the use

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of automatic weapons, forced removal of ballot boxes etc. from over 790 polling centers in 100 electorates. As an independent and fearless monitoring institution, the CMEV made a convincing case to support the suggestion that the final results were seriously flawed. The opposition UNP seemed to have been the victims. Guilty of most of the election offences were the People's Alliance supporters in Kandy and Nuwara Eliya districts and the EPDP in the north. In the Kayts electorate, ten thousand more ballot papers were alleged to have been sent in excess of what was required.

Struggling to accommodate all parties that helped her to form a government, the President announced a 22-member Cabinet that was sworn in on the 16th. With the President retaining Defence, Finance and Planning, the Ministers included Ratnasiri Wickremanayake (Prime Minister, with charge of Buddha Sasana, Religious Affairs and Plantations), Anuruddha Ratwatte (Power and Energy), G.L.Pieris (Constitutional Affairs and Industrial Development), Lakshman Kadirgamar from the National List (Foreign Affairs), Arumugam Thondaman (Estate Infrastructure and Livestock Development), Mahinda Rajapakse (Fisheries) and A.H.M.Fowzie (Highways). The lone M.P. from the north Douglas Devananda was richly rewarded with Development, Rehabilitation,and Reconstruction of the North, and Tamil Affairs, North and East. Anuruddha Ratwatte as Deputy Defence Minister.

With the Government determined than ever on the path of a military solution, events happened with startling rapidity during the rest of the month of October. Minutes before the new Cabinet was sworn in, a suspected LTTE suicide bomber blew himself up in Colombo, wounding at least 23 people. In Jaffna, a well-known Tamil journalist Mylvaganam Nimalarajan was shot dead at his own home. At Nagerkovil area in the north, a Russian-made MI-24 Air Force helicopter was shot down by the LTTE. The pilot had escaped, but the fate of four others on board was not known.

**The Nimalarajan killing**: A Reuters report published in the *Asian Age*, datelined Colombo, October 20, said:-



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"Unidentified gunmen shot dead a Tamil journalist and wounded his parents after bursting into their home in the northern Sri Lankan city of Jaffna, colleagues said. Mailvaganam Nimalarajan filed a report for the BBC' Tamil service on Thursday night just before he was killed", said Elmo Fernando, BBC radio's local Sinhala correspondent. He said Nimalarajan's parents were wounded in the attack. Both of them were taken to hospital where his father was listed in serious condition. ...

.....The Free Media Movement, a Colombo-based media watchdog, said it suspected a former Tamil militant group whose leader was sworn in on Thursday as a Cabinet Minister. The killing provoked a storm of protest in the country with the media minister, political parties and human rights groups condemning it as a threat to the freedom of expression."

An AFP report datelined Vienna said:-

"The Vienna-based International Press Institute (IPI) called on President Chandrika Kumaratunga to investigate the murder of Mailvaganam Nimalarajan, who worked for the BBC among others. ..Nimalarajan had reported on alleged vote-rigging in the October 10 parliamentary elections. "IPI urges your Excellency to ensure that there is a thorough investigation into the murder and that those responsible are brought swiftly to justice," it said in the letter to the President."

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in a letter to the President condemned the murder of veteran journalist Mailvaganam Nimalarajan, a Jaffna-based journalist who reported for various news organizations, including the BBC's Tamil and Sinhala-language services, the Tamil language daily *Virakesari* and the Sinhala-language *Ravaya. CPJ* said:-

"As a non-partisan organization of journalists dedicated to



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> the defence of Press freedom around the world, CPJ is deeply saddened by the assassination of our colleague. Nimalarajan was an extraordinarily courageous journalist, working at great personal risk to report on the consequences of the civil war on the residents of the Jaffna peninsula where one-third of the 470,000 residents have been forced to flee their homes since fighting intensified in the north earlier this year, according to international relief agencies. The course of the 17-year old war between government forces and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam cannot be adequately reported because of the administration's failure to grant journalists access to the conflict areas. In this context Nimalarajan's reports were a particularly crucial source of information".

It was found that all such protests and pleas were in vain. It became clear that when years went by without the assassins being brought to justice, the government itself was helping to cover up the crime.

**LTTE attacks Trinco port:** On October 23, the LTTE launched simultaneous suicide boat attacks on a strategic naval base in eastern Trincomalee, killing two sailors, injuring 40 others and shot down an MI-24 helicopter the same day. Army spokesman Brig.Sanath Karunaratne said that four LTTE suicide boats packed with explosives and heavy weapons launched a dawn attack on the Trincomalee harbour which also housed the Navy's eastern command headquarters. Using anti-aircraft missiles, the Tigers brought down the MI-24 helicopter when it went to engage LTTE mortar positions. The chopper with four members of the crew went missing near Upparu in Trincomalee district. The bodies of the crew members were recovered later. That was the second helicopter to be shot down in just five days.

**The Bindunuwewa massacre:** Two days later, on October 25, saw one of the worst acts of barbarism since the slaughter of 49 inmates in the Welikade

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prison in 1983. Bindunuwewa, less than three miles from Bandarawela town in the hill country housed what was claimed as a model rehabilitation centre for young Tamil youths who had surrendered to the authorities after being suspected of belonging to the LTTE. These youths, many of them in their teens, were held under the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act without any charge, and the Centre itself served as a propaganda tool for the government to tell the world how efforts were made to reintegrate LTTE "child soldiers" into society. During the early hours of that morning, a large mob, reported to be nearly 2,000 strong, surrounded the centre, and aided by some home guards and policemen, began attacking the inmates with clubs, swords, axes, knives and stones. At least 29 of the defenceless youths were killed, and several others injured. According to some of the survivors, the youths were subject to brutal torture, the building was set on fire, and some inmates even thrown into the inferno.

The attack was preceded by some Sinhala chauvinistic elements who carried on a vicious campaign against the Centre, calling it a "Tiger den" in Sinhala heartland. Hand-written Sinhala posters that appeared the morning after the murders gloating over the attack and rumours of posters put up the night before pointed to some degree of organization behind the murders. The timing of the attack could not have been worse. It came the day before Deepavali, a Hindu festival, with most inmates being Hindus.

The massacre drew international condemnation. Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan who was "profoundly distressed" by the reported killings, according to a statement issued through a UN spokesman, called on the Sri Lankan government to conduct an impartial inquiry leading to the prosecution of those responsible for the killings.(*Reuters*, 28th Oct.). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) expressed deep shock and indignation over the killing of detainees who were under the government's protection. ICRC spokesman Harsha Gunawardene said that according to International Humanitarian Law it was the sole responsibility of the Detaining Authority to ensure the physical integrity and security of detainess



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under its care at all times and under all circumstances. (*Weekend Express*, Oct. 28-29). In Chennai, in India, the Tamil Nationalist Movement leader Pazha Nedumaran said: "*Such an incident would not have taken place in any civilized nation...It is clear that the Tamils are unsafe in Sri Lanka whether they are in state detention or living normal life...*" R.Bhagwan Singh, *Asian Age,* Oct.28).

Three days after the massacre, ethnic clashes broke out after the funeral of one of the victims. Two Tamil youths were shot dead while protesting against the massacre. Tamil shops were looted and burnt. In retaliation, Tamils set fire to Sinhalese shops and attacked vehicles, and set fire to a train at nearby Waragoda station. Although the government clamped an indefinite curfew around the central town of Nuwara Eliya, sporadic violence was reported in other parts of central Sri Lanka. Faced by a major propaganda blow the President asked Defence Secretary Chandrananda de Silva to hold an immediate inquiry into the incident, but R.Sampanthan, Secretary General of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) said: *"..Sadly our experience is that while condemnation and assurances of impartial investigation are easily forthcoming, the end result is that no tangible action is taken and the offenders carry on with a sense of impunity".(Weekend Express,* Oct.28-29*).*

On October 30, Deputy Minister and the leader of the Up-country People's Front (UPF), Periyasamy Chandrasekaran was taken into custody by a police team, detained at the 4th Floor of the C.I.D. headquarters in Colombo, interrogated for eight days, and produced before the Colombo Fort magistrate and released. Mr. Chandrasekeran told the *Weekend Express (*Nov.11-12*)* that the "deep psychotic fear of the government as to how the UPF was able to organize such a massive protest campaign within a short period in the hills" was part of the reason for his arrest. Protesting Mr.Chandrasekaran's arrest, estate workers went on a five-day boycott resulting in massive losses to tea companies. Tea, a major revenue earner for the country, depends largely on the right time for plucking. But because of the upheaval in the hill country

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and the strike by estate workers, tea shoots grew to treble their usual length and consequent wastage.

Investigating the Bindunuwewa massacre, the Human Rights Commission charged that police negligence had led to the tragedy. In an 18-page Interim Report, the Commission called for stern action against the respective police officers. The Commission said: -

> "From all the information that we received in the course of our inquiry it is clear that the police officers, approximately 60 in number, have been guilty of grave dereliction of duty in not taking any effective action to prevent the acts of violence that resulted in the deaths of 26 inmates and injury to several others... In any event the crowd that had collected had not possessed any firearms and were armed only with knives, poles and other implements. The police on the other hand were fully armed and could have easily brought the crowd under control...".

The report was signed by the Chairman HRC Faisz Mustapha, (later to become Sri Lanka's High Commissioner in London) and Commissioners Godfrey Gunatilleke, Manouri Muttetuwagama, Sarath Cooray and N.Selvakumaran following their visit made to Bandarawela on October 27.

November saw a surprise turn in political events. That was marked by the arrival on October 31 of Norwegian special envoy Erik Solheim who was to play a tireless, leading role as a facilitator in the peace process. Along with the Norwegian ambassador for Sri Lanka Jon Westborg and Ms.Kjersti Tromsdal, an Executive Officer in the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, he was flown up to Vavuniya by military helicopter. From there, the team proceeded under ICRC escort in the Embassy vehicle which was waiting for them at Vavuniya. At the unofficial border the LTTE escorted them to a guest house at one of the LTTE bases in Mallavi. According to the Tiger Radio, the *Voice of Tigers,* the delegation first paid a courtesy call on the LTTE leader Velupillai Pirabhakaran. At the talks held later, LTTE's political wing

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leader Tamilselvan and Shanker, an aeronautical engineer and a senior LTTE cadre who was also the interpreter, were present. The talks lasted two hours. Returning to Colombo after two nights in the Vanni, the delegation briefed President Kumaratunga on what transpired at the meeting they had with the LTTE leader.

Although Mr.Solheim refused to reveal any details of talks they had with Mr.Pirabhakaran or with the President, it was known from LTTE sources that the LTTE leader had called for a de-escalation of the armed conflict and restoration of normalcy in the Tamil homeland for any negotiations to become fruitful. Mr.Solheim however said that his effort was not related in any way to the parties conducting the war on a day-to-day basis.. "We cannot expect the parties to stop the war until a peace process is started", he said.

On the Vanni visit, the political correspondent of the *Weekend Express* had a story to tell. He wrote:

> "...Since it was late evening they (the Norwegians) showered and sat down to dinner. Dinner was served buffet style and comprised mixed fried rice and mixed fried noodles. Before they sat down for dinner they were politely asked whether they wanted Western or spicy traditional food. They requested traditional spicy food. The accompaniments were spicy curries like chicken, prawns and fish with lots of vegetables The visitors had a peaceful night's sleep. The beds were comfortable and the linen was clean. They had no air conditioners but had lights and fans which were powered by a generator.
>
> For breakfast on Wednesday, November 1, they ate Dosai and Idly with sambar, chutney, chicken and vegetable curries. Here again they were asked whether they wanted Continental breakfast. "We preferred staying with traditional spicy food and it was that which we had throughout the stay", they said. They left for Vavuniya on Thursday November 2 and arrived in

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> Colombo at 5.30 p.m. When asked about their first meeting with Mr.Pirabhakaran, they said they met him on Tuesday November 1. He was dressed in a grayish safari suit and looked 100 per cent fit. He was very smart and unarmed. He spoke clearly in Tamil and with the help of an English translator they were given the English version. The talks lasted for nearly two hours and were held in another location, which the delegation was unable to divulge"

How did this sudden Norwegian visit come about? Evidently it was a secret arrangement of the President with no one else being privy to it, except Foreign Minister Kadirgamar. Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake went on television denying any knowledge of Solheim's talks with Pirabhakaran and vowed the Tamil Tigers would be crushed. "*The surprise news of a fresh dialogue with the LTTE via Norway has given cause for concern to not only those in the upper echelons of the security forces but also to other ranks", reported the Sunday Times* quoting a senior defence official. Speaking on grounds of anonymity, the official said: *"When we have provided the troops with all the modern equipment and told them to crack down on the LTTE, news of peace talks without any prior warning has a devastating effect on their morale. This seriously affects their battlefield performance*". That of course was mere hot air, when one looks back at the "battlefield performance" of the army over the years. If the President had to engage Norwegian facilitation, it was a clear admission that she knew the armed forces were unable to defeat the LTTE militarily.

If the visit of the Norwegian facilitator passed off without much backlash, comments made by the visiting British Commonwealth Affairs Minister Peter Hain, roused the ire of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar. Speaking at the British Council on the 22nd November, Peter Hain said: - *"The LTTE, like the IRA, need to acknowledge that, whilst a Tamil kingdom constitutionally split from the rest of the island will not receive recognition by Europe, the USA or indeed India,* ***the principle of self-determination and control over***

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***most if not all the key policies affecting daily life would be supported by the international community".*** It is the latter part of Hain's statement that made Kadirgamar, three weeks later, give a haughty interview to *the Daily News.*

> "...We will make it clear to the British Government that we do not welcome such statements", he said. "I take rather strong exception to that statement. Because self-determination could very well mean the right to cessation. As the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, I do not welcome statements made by people outside the country, even though they come from very friendly countries, prescribing remedies for our problem...".

A columnist writing for the *Sunday Leader* (Dec.17) commented:- "Mustering all the pride and conceit a developing nation living off the charity of the western world is capable of possessing, Kadirgamar now tells Western nations talking of a just peace where they get off.....the Kadirgamar doctrine in this context seems to mean in simple terms, "You chaps go on giving us money to conduct our unwinnable war , but the moment you suggest a solution to end it, you are treading on forbidden grounds...."

The LTTE leader's annual Heroes Day speech on November 27 has always been eagerly awaited both by friends and foes alike. There was an added expectancy this year, to know what he would say, particularly in the wake of the Norwegian initiative earlier this month. The day before Mr.Pirabhakaran's speech was broadcast, the *Sunday Times*, Colombo, said in an editorial :-

> "The hype seemed akin to a State of the Union address by a United States President, the Pope's Christmas Day message, and the British Queen's. Peaceniks, war mongers, diplomats and the like wait in awe for what has turned out to be the annual declaration by the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran – the man who has for 18 long years directed a separatist war against the State..."

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It turned out to be one meant for both the "peaceniks" as well as the "war mongers". While seemingly holding an olive branch in one hand, there was a hint of an iron fist in the other. When he said:-

> "Our liberation organization is prepared to participate in negotiations to find a political solution to the ethnic conflict through peaceful means. We are not opposed to peaceful processes of resolving conflicts. Nor are we reluctant to engage in peaceful dialogue...We are not imposing any pre-conditions for peace talks .Yet, we insist on the creation of a cordial atmosphere and conditions of normalcy conducive for peace negotiations. It is practically difficult for both the parties who have been involved in a savage and bloody war for the last two decades with mutual animosity and distrust to suddenly enter a peace process, while continuing hostilities. It is precisely for this reason we propose a process of de-escalation of war leading to a cessation of hostilities and the creation of a peaceful, cordial environment",

It was seen as an eminently reasonable way of getting over the political impasse, but unfortunately the LTTE leader's suggestion was met with conspicuous silence from the government. But what brought angry reactions from Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake and the JVP's Wimal Weerawansa was when Mr.Pirabhakaran said:-

> "...Jaffna does not belong to the Sinhala nation. Jaffna belongs to the people of Jaffna.. Sovereignty is not a divine right of a State. Sovereignty derives from the people; it is an inalienable right of a people. It is the people of Jaffna who have sovereign right over the Jaffna peninsula. The Sinhala nation cannot impose its sovereignty over the historically constituted lands of the Tamils by military aggression and occupation. As the liberation army of our people we will not allow our traditional

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lands to be occupied by alien forces. Whatever challenges we have to face, regardless of the obstacles we have to overcome, whichever force opposes us, our liberation movement is determined to liberate Jaffna....

"...As a nation entitled to the right to self-determination, our people reserve the right to defend themselves by armed struggle against State oppression of genocidal proportions. Therefore Tamil Eelam war is conducted within the norms of International Humanitarian Law pertaining to armed conflict...But the Sri Lankan government has been deliberately distorting the nature of this war and its evolutionary historical background and debasing it as a phenomenon of "terrorism"....if the Sinhala nation fails to redeem itself from the grip of racism and continues its repression against the Tamils, we have no alternative other than to secede and form an independent Tamil state".

**LTTE declares unilateral cease-fire**: A furious Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, told Frederica Jansz of the *Sunday Leader,* (Dec. 3) :- *"I take no notice of such speeches and so have no interest in commenting on Prabhakaran's speeches. That is for the Norwegians to do.... I am not interested in what that man has to say"*. The Prime Minister had already gone on record telling a Sinhalese audience in the south on the same day Pirabhakaran made his speech that peace talks were out and that it was a fight to the finish. While the Prime Minister kept his hawk-like stance and the President and Foreign Minister Kadirgamar made evasive comments about peace talks, the LTTE caught the government by surprise by declaring a month-long unilateral cease-fire from midnight 24th December to midnight 24th January 2001.

Meanwhile, the government armed forces, in their anxiety to go ahead with their planned bid to seize the Navatkuli bridge before the cease-fire came into operation met with tough opposition from the Tigers. Scott McDonald



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reporting for *Reuters,* date-lined Colombo, Dec.22 (*Asian Age,* Dec.23) said: *"Military officials who did not want to be identified said government troops had run into tough opposition in their bid to seize the strategic Navatkuli bridge – which the rebels captured in May – three km from Jaffna."* He quoted military spokesman Brigadier Sarath Karunaratne as saying that 22 soldiers had been killed and 47 wounded and put the number of rebel dead at more than 30.

**The cease-fire message**: A faxed message from the LTTE' International Secretariat in London sent on December 21, to the Colombo-based media, both local and foreign, said:-

> "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in an official statement issued today from its headquarters in the Wanni, northern Sri Lanka, announced the declaration of a month-long unilateral cease-fire as a gesture of goodwill during the festive season to facilitate and promote initiatives towards a peace process.
>
> "Mr. Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader and military commander of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, has issued orders to all units and combat formations of the Tamil Liberation Army to cease hostile military actions against the Sri Lanka armed forces from midnight 24th December, 2000 to midnight 24th January 2001.
>
> "We make this declaration of cessation of armed hostilities unilaterally hoping that the Sri Lanka government will reciprocate positively and instruct its armed forces to observe peace during the festive season of Christmas, New Year and Pongal (Hindu harvest festival). Our decision to cease armed hostilities should be viewed as a genuine expression of goodwill and indicating our sincere desire for peace and negotiated political settlement. We offer this space of peace to facilitate and promote initiatives

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to create congenial conditions of normalcy de-escalating the armed confrontation.

"If Sri Lanka responds positively by ceasing armed hostilities against our forces and takes steps to implement the Norwegian proposal of mutual confidence-building measures, the LTTE will be prepared to extend the period of peace to create cordial conditions for a stable cease-fire and direct negotiations".

Caught by surprise by the LTTE offer, there was complete confusion for the next 24 hours, both at the political and the military level. Different Cabinet ministers reacted in different ways. One said the offer should have come through the Norwegians. Another said the offer would not be accepted. A third said it was only a plot by the LTTE. State radio quoted Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake as saying:- *"The government is prepared to consider the cease-fire declaration from the LTTE once it is officially intimated"*. Army commander Lt.Gen.Lionel Balagalle was besieged by inquiries from field commanders about the future operations, but was told that there was no change. *"All systems go"* was the answer. But Iqbal Athas said in the *Sunday Times* (Dec.24) that the President who was in London at that time had decided to reject the offer. Meanwhile, international pressure was building up, urging the Government to accept the cease-fire offer. UK's Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Peter Hain who was in the island earlier, hailed the LTTE's offer as a welcome move. In a statement from London, Mr.Hain said: *"I encourage the Sri Lankan government to follow suit and seize the opportunity offered by the initiative"* The opposition UNP urged the government to *"give serious consideration to the offer by the LTTE and grab this opportunity"*.

But there was no change in Government thinking. Having placed the country on a war footing only five months earlier, having pumped colossal amounts of money on modernizing the armed forces, having told the people

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to accept the burden of price increases for the sake of defeating the LTTE militarily, having devised new strategies to do a final push to free the entire Jaffna peninsula from LTTE presence, the acceptance of a cease-fire would have meant being cheated of all the painful planning that had gone before. A large number of artillery and heavy 120 mortars and multi barrel rocket launchers from Pakistan's Ordinance factories were pouring into Colombo. 300 heavy trucks, courtesy of US Army were due. From the original four Israeli Kfir jets there was going to be a quantum leap of 16 of them. Until their arrival, there was going to be helicopter gunships with the latest Israeli anti-missile systems. Even mercenary pilots were being engaged. Given all these, how does one expect the Government to reciprocate the LTTE's unilateral ceasefire? From the point of view of the armed forces too, taking advantage of LTTE inactivity to seize more territory in Jaffna was too strong a temptation to resist. And so the year ended, with only one aim – war in 2001!

Postscript: *A minor drama took place during the month of December that went largely unnoticed in Colombo. On December 4, M.K.Eelaventhan, a high-profile Eelam activist in Chennai was deported to Colombo. Indian Immigration officials and a team of policemen went to his house at Arambakkam around 5 a.m. He was driven to the airport and put on a Sri Lankan Airlines flight. Well-known in Tamil Nadu for his consistent campaigning for the Eelam Tamil cause, he never hid his sympathy for the LTTE, despite the organization being banned in India.*

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# Chapter 35

## 2001 – 2002: A Summary of Major Events

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# 2001 – 2002: A Summary of Major Events

## 2001

***January 16 :***Operation "Kinshasa IX" launched with the objective of re-taking Elephant Pass, but is foiled after two days of unexpected "defensive action" by LTTE, with heavy losses on both sides.

Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar calls on British Government to proscribe the LTTE under the country's anti-terrorism law. Failure to do so would be considered *"an unfriendly act that would impose a considerable strain on our relations",* he says. (*Sunday Observer*, Colombo, Jan.21)

***February 24***: LTTE extends unilateral ceasefire for a further (third) month but with no reciprocity on the Government side. No cease-fire before talks, says President.

***February 28***: Britain succumbs to Sri Lankan pressure and includes the LTTE in a list of 21 "terrorist" organizations, the majority of them Islamic. Emboldened by the British ban, Sri Lanka pressurizes Canada, Australia and European countries to follow suit. European countries refuse to oblige. The LTTE relocate their London-based International Secretariat to the Vanni.

***March 21***: A major confrontation in the high seas between the Sri Lankan Navy and the Sea Tigers results in the government's loss of a Dvora Fast Attack Craft worth Rs.500 million. Five naval personnel declared Missing in Action and feared dead. (Iqbal Athas, *Sunday Times*, April 1)


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The LTTE extend their unilateral cease-fire for a fourth month ending April 24. Foreign Minister Kadirgamar tells parliament that a date and the venue for talks with the LTTE would be announced before the end of month.

***April 6:*** Norway's Ambassador in Colombo Jon Westborg with Embassy spokesman Thomas Strangland hold extensive talks in Mallavi in the Vanni with LTTE political wing leader S.P.Thamilselvam and report back to the President in Colombo.

***April 15:*** Government declares a 5-day ceasefire. One of the largest shipments of heavy arms arrives in Colombo under the cease-fire (*The Island*, Feb.15)

***April 16***: Award-winning *Sunday Times*, London, correspondent Marie Colvin (45) shot in the eye by a Sri Lankan army night patrol while she was trying to cross from the LTTE-controlled area near Madhu Junction. She had made a secret visit to meet with Tiger leaders in the Vanni.

***April 23***: LTTE call off their 4-month old cease-fire.

***April 24***: Government launches new offensive code-named *"Agni Khiela"* (Rod of Fire) to re-capture Elephant Pass. It ended "*four days after its launch with two Divisions of the Army returning to the very defence lines from which they broke out. The enemy attacks appeared to be too much to contain. The four-day long adventure had cost the lives of over 180 troops including three officers. The clandestine "Voice of Tigers" radio monitored in the Vanni had announced the LTTE had recovered the bodies of 30 soldiers. . They were to be handed over to the ICRC in LTTE-controlled Mallavi ...that would place the death toll at 210. Those wounded were over 1600 soldiers, at least 225 of them seriously". (*Iqbal Athas, *Sunday Times*, April 29).

***May 4:*** U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell urges Sri Lanka to stop the fighting and open a peace dialogue at a meeting with Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Kadirgamar who called on him. A statement issued by the U.S. embassy in Colombo said: - *"The United States has long believed that the*



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*Sri Lankan conflict cannot be settled with military means...*" *(Sunday Times*, Colombo, May 6)

Canadian High Commissioner Ruth Archibald's meeting with LTTE's political wing chief S.P.Thamilselvan during her four-day trip to the Vanni last week has triggered off a mild controversy in the Canadian media. *"The meeting was part of a four day visit to where I went to see Canadian projects"*, Archibald said. *"The purpose of the visit was not to see Thamilselvan but to see the projects. The meeting was a coincidence" (*D.B.S.Jeyaraj, *Sunday Leader, May 6)*

***May 15***: Assassination attempt on Thamilselvan? The LTTE political wing leader travelling with a retinue of escorts from Puthukudiyiruppu to Mallawi has a narrow escape, when a claymore blast hit an accompanying Pajero vehicle, killing an LTTE trooper. Mr.Thamilselvan was on his way for a meeting with Norwegian envoy Eric Solheim the following day. The Tamilnet website said the blast "*was set off by a deep penetration unit of the Sri Lankan army*". Military spokesman Brigadier Sanath Karunaratne dismisses the report as "*utter rubbish*".

***May 18:*** *"On no account can we lift the ban on them"*, President tells Eric Solheim as was demanded by the LTTE.

***May 26:*** Foreign Minister Kadirgamar categorically denies claims that the Government was entertaining thoughts of lifting the ban on the LTTE.

***June 8:*** Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway Thorbjorn Jagland calls on President Kumaratunga in Colombo. It was decided that Norway "would henceforth participate at a high level to advance the peace process".

***July 24:*** **Tamil Tigers carry out a devastating attack on Bandaranaike International Airport and the adjoining air-force base, destroying thirteen aircraft and causing over $400 million damage. The Air Force lost a total of eight aircraft, including two Israeli-built Kfir jets, one MiG-27 ground attack aircraft and two helicopters. The loss to the entire**

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**military complex would be closer to $500 million. Sri Lankan Airlines which is partly owned and fully managed by Emirates of Dubai since April 1998, lost two Airbus A-330 aircraft and one A-340, which were completely destroyed and two A-320s, which were slightly damaged. The attack came on the 18th anniversary of Black July 1983.**

> "...The Tigers are believed to have waited until foreign flights had departed and probably timed their attack to minimize the possibility of foreigners getting hurt. Miraculously, there were no civilian fatalities in the attack. Nor were any tourists hurt....(*Sunday Observer*, Colombo, July 29)

> "Wild firing by terrified Sri Lanka Air Force personnel hit and badly damaged no less than nine other aircraft, apart from the dozen that were destroyed by the Tigers, according to senior Air Force sources in Katunayake. No less than six Kfir jets and three transport helicopters were hit by this "friendly fire".... Even the three Sri Lankan Airlines Airbuses that were damaged had been hit by firing of Air Force personnel, and not by the Tigers, sources said.... Excited and panicky airmen had even fired at each other in the darkness, and a colleague killed one airman...." (Defence Correspondent, *The Island,* Sunday, July 29)

In retaliation, two Israeli-built Kfir jets and two MiG-27s bombed suspected LTTE positions in the Jaffna peninsula the same afternoon.

***August 4:*** *The Weekend Express*, one of the five English-language weekly newspapers ceases publication. Launched in 1995 by Express Newspapers Ltd. the paper was plagued by financial problems for some time.

***August 18:*** A MiG-27 ground attack aircraft crashes and catches fire as two Ukrainian pilot instructors mark Aviation Day with aerobatics. It was one of the two aircraft that went on a bombing mission over Jaffna soon after



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the Tiger attack on the Katunayake base on July 24. The pilot was killed on the spot.

***September 11:*** **Two hijacked American airliners rip through the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York, leaving the US Government and the American people in a state of shock. 2,749 lives were lost.**

***September 26:*** Col. Shankar (Vythilingam Sornalingam), a senior LTTE leader and close associate of Mr. Pirabhakaran killed in a claymore mine attack near Oddusuddan. The LTTE in a strong condemnatory statement accused a "deep penetration commando unit of the Sri Lankan army" for the killing. The killing occurring on the 14th anniversary of death during hunger strike of Lt.Col.Thileepan was especially provocative, the statement said.

***October 10:*** Parliament dissolved in the wake of defections from the People's Alliance ranks. New parliamentary polls scheduled for December 5, just over a year after the previous polls in 2000.

***December 3:*** Sri Lankan government calls in the army as pre-election violence causes 41 deaths. An island-wide curfew was imposed overnight.

***December 5:*** Voting ends in the most violent parliamentary elections ever, with bombs, gunfire, and an Army blockade that prevented up to 130,000 Tamils in the East from reaching the polling stations. The Army said it had information that the LTTE intended to mix with would-be voters and disrupt elections. *"This decision will disenfranchise many thousands of voters, which I believe will have a significant impact on the outcome in those electoral districts*", said Mr John Cushnahan, head of a 48-member team of European Union observers. Elsewhere, opposition Sri Lanka Muslim Congress said seven of its supporters were shot dead and six seriously wounded in a clash with supporters of the ruling People's Alliance (*Reuters, Asian Age*, Dec.6)

***December 7:*** **The UNP-led United National Front of three parties won the elections with 129 of the 225 parliamentary seats. The People's**

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**Alliance secure 96 seats, along with its supporting parties. UNP leader Ranil Wickremasinghe (52) who said he would hold peace talks with the LTTE was sworn in as Prime Minister. With the President and Prime Minister belonging to two different parties, Colombo is set for a period of power-sharing and cohabitation. In the North and East, the Tamil National Alliance gain a landslide victory with 24 seats, including one to be nominated in the National List.**

***December 12:*** A 25-member Cabinet was sworn in after overcoming the contentious issue of who will keep the all-important Defence Ministry portfolio. Mr.Tilak Marapone, a former Attorney General and long-time associate of Mr.Ranil Wickremasinghe became Minister of Defence. Mr.K.N.Choksy was named Minister of Finance. Among other Ministers who took oaths were:- Tyronne Fernando (Foreign Affairs), Arumugam Thondaman (Housing and Plantation Infrastructure), Rauf Hakeem (Port Development and Shipping and Eastern Development and Muslim Religious Affairs), Prof.G.L.Peiris (Enterprise Development, Industrial Policy and Investment Promotion and Constitutional Affairs), Karu Jayasuriya (Power and Energy) and W.J.M.Lokubandara (Justice, Law Reform and National Integration.)

***December 19:*** LTTE announce they were declaring a month-long, unilateral ceasefire from December 24 "as a goodwill measure to facilitate the peace process". It was believed that the new government unlike the previous one, would reciprocate.

## 2002

***January 1:*** Guns went silent as 2002 dawned, with both the government forces and the LTTE observing the truce which came into effect from midnight December 24 last year.

***January 2***: A Police team led by S.P. Kulasiri Udugampola raid a "Safe

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House" at Athurugiriya operated by the Directorate of Military Intelligence and discover a large arms cache including deadly thermobaric weapons. The raid leads to embarrassment all round. An army officer and five men, including a Tamil were taken for questioning and detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The men were members of a deep penetration unit that used to infiltrate Tiger-controlled areas and carry out attacks on LTTE leaders, as it happened in the case of Tiger leader Col.Shankar.

***January 15:*** On Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasighe's order the embargo on consumer goods to the North and East is lifted. While welcoming the Prime Minister's gesture, LTTE's head of the political wing S.P.Thamilselvan said the lifting of the ban on the LTTE would smooth the way for resumption of peace talks.

***January 20***: LTTE releases ten Prisoners of War (POW)

***January 21***: Both LTTE and the government extend the cease-fire for a further month.

February 14: As peace moves get under way, Amnesty International (Sri Lankan branch) issues urgent action appeal charging the LTTE with recruitment of child soldiers.

***February 15:*** **The A-9 Kandy-Jaffna Road from Vavuniya to Kilinochchi re-opened.. The road was dubbed the "Highway of Death" during 1997-98 when the Sri Lankan military conducted its biggest offensive since the beginning of the conflict, but failed to wrest control of it.**

***February 23:*** **A cease-fire agreement between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam comes into force. The 7-page Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe and LTTE leader Velupillai Pirabhakaran is deposited with the Norwegian Government. Both the New Delhi and U.S. governments welcome the agreement.**

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***February 26:*** President Chandrika Kumaratunga threatens to cancel cease-fire agreement. The *Daily Mirror* quoted her as saying at a party rally: "*I can stop Ranil Wickremasinghe's agreement with one letter to the Army commander. There are several suspicious clauses in the agreement with the LTTE. I have appointed a committee to study the agreement and the report would be out in a day or two. Then I will take necessary action*". Meanwhile, members of an International mission to monitor the Cease-fire agreement arrive in Colombo.

***March 1:*** US Secretary of State Colin Powell assures the Prime Minister of fullest support to the peace process.

***March 2:*** Head of the Monitoring Mission General Trond Furuhovde arrives in Colombo and meets Prime Minister. Prior to his arrival he had met with Anton Balasingham in London.

***March 7:*** General Trond Furuhovde meets LTTE leader Pirabakaran in the Vanni.

***March 14:*** While Buddhist opposition to the MOU continues in the South, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe arrives in Jaffna. It was the first visit by a head of the Sri Lankan government in 20 years! "*I want to tell the people here that we are all equals*", he said. *(Asian Age,* quoting *AP*, March 15).

***March 15:*** US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Christina Rocca who arrived in Colombo the previous day meets the Prime Minister in Jaffna.

***March 25:*** LTTE's theoretician and chief negotiator Anton Balasingham, accompanied by his wife Adele, arrives in the Vanni, after boarding a sea plane at Male in the Maldives. The plane lands at Iranaimadu tank, where the LTTE leader and wife Mathivathany greet the couple.

***March 26:*** Norwegian representative Eric Solheim meets LTTE leader in the Vanni

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***March 29:*** Norwegian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Vidar Helgeson arrives in Bangkok to finalise arrangements for the staging of Sri Lankan peace talks in Thailand.

***April 1***: Indian High Commissioner Gopalakrishna Gandhi and Economic and Commercial Counsellor V.Ashok visit Trincomalee and inspect the oil storage facilities at China Bay.

***April 7:*** National Television is exploring the possibility of giving a live telecast of the news conference to be given in the Vanni by LTTE leader Pirabakaran on April 10. Some 300 local and international journalists are expected at the news conference, the first by the LTTE leader in 15 years. (*Sunday Times,* April 7)

***April 10:*** **A clean-shaven Pirabakaran, wearing a gray safari suit was escorted to the venue of the conference by armed bodyguards. His remarks were translated into English by Dr.Anton Balasingham. He was flanked at the conference table by Dr.Balasingham, Mr.S.P.Thamilselvan, LTTE's Eastern commander Karuna and Mrs.Adele Balasingham. Apart from members of the Indian media, there were many foreign journalists, most of them representing British newspapers. Strict security precautions preceded the news conference. The many hundreds of journalists were frisked and Tiger security men spent hours combing through television equipment. *"We are afraid of a repeat of what happened to Ahmad Shah Masood"*, one rebel told Reuters, recalling the anti-Taliban Afghan general killed just days before the September 11 attacks on the United States. Assassins posing as television journalists had killed Masood when they detonated explosives packed in a TV camera.**

While saying that it was not the appropriate time to drop the issue of a Tamil Eelam since the peace process had not moved far enough, Mr.Pirabakaran later indicated that he was willing to drop the demand provided the UNF government came forward with an acceptable solution. The question of the right of self-determination was paramount, he said. The LTTE also wanted

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the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the de-proscription of the organization. He also made a special plea to India to forget the past and support the peace initiative. (Amantha Perera in Kilinochchi, *Sunday Leader*)

***April 16***: LTTE open a political office in Jaffna, as permitted under the cease-fire agreement .

***April 19:*** *"US policy would be unaffected should the government of Sri Lanka decide to remove the ban on the LTTE",* US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage tells Constitutional Affairs Minister G.L.Peiris in Washington. (*Reuters)*

***April 22:*** Police prevent Buddhist monks protesting against peace plan marching to Prime Minister's office.

***April 23***: Anton Balasingham leaves Sri Lanka. His departure creates controversy as the sea plane which was to take him back to the Maldives strayed from the flight path and flew low over a flotilla of Tiger boats, but the incident passed off without any repercussions. In Colombo, thousands of "Marxist" JVPers demonstrate against the cease-fire with the LTTE.

***May 10***: LTTE permits the operation of bus services on the A-9 road

***June 16:*** *Sunday Leader* quotes Defence Secretary Austin Fernando as saying that an estimated 50,000 army deserters are at large, and that they could be held responsible for the increasing number of crimes in the country.

***June 18:*** A 3-member government delegation led by Bernard Gunathilleke, head of the Government's Peace Secretariat returns after meeting with Thamilselvan in the Vanni .

***June 30:*** A fact-finding mission to investigate the killing of Jaffna journalist Nimalarajan states that police investigations into the murder had been held up for more than ten months due to political pressure. Two of the main suspects are alleged to be active members of the EPDP which at the time of the killing was a constituent party of President Chandrika Kumaratunga's



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government. The mission included Belgian lawyer Luc Walleyn representing the "Damocles Network" and Vincent Brossel representing "Reporters Without Borders". Interior Minister John Amaratunge and Attorney General K.C.Kamalasabaysan assure the mission that the government and judiciary are committed to completing the investigations. Some of those interviewed by the mission however say that they believe some of the suspects may have left the country. (*Sunday Times*, June 30)

***July 1***: Leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress Rauf Hakeem calls on the LTTE to help stop ethnic clashes in the East. He said mobs had gutted the entire bazaar in the Valaichenai area destroying more than 100 shops. At least 90% of the shops, he said, belonged to Muslims. He said five people had been killed and more than 150 Muslims and Tamils injured. The LTTE denied any involvement in the riots, and have appealed to the public to remain calm.

***July 5***: "Black Tiger" commemoration ceremonies are held in Jaffna, in the Vanni and in the East. At Mullaitivu, LTTE leader appears in public and garlands portraits of leading Black Tigers. It was on July 5, 1987 that "Captain Miller" the first suicide cadre drove an explosive-laden truck at the Nelliady army camp, killing 19 soldiers and wounding more than twenty others.

***July 24***: Sri Lankan legislators exchanged punches in what both the government and Opposition said were premeditated plans by the other side to disrupt Parliament. …The war of words across the floor turned into fighting when Opposition M.P.s tried to grab the Mace, and Government M.P.s rose to defend it….(*Reuters,* Colombo, *Asian Age* July 25)

***July 24***: Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe has a 20-minute meeting with President George W. Bush at the Oval office of the White House – "the first high-level exchange between Sri Lanka and the United States in 18 years, since President Junius Jayewardene was hosted by President Ronald Reagan in 1984", says a report in the *Sunday Observer* of July 28. After meetings with Secretary of State Colin Powell and national security adviser

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Condoleeza Rice, Mr.Wickremasinghe defends the government's intention to lift the ban on the LTTE "prior to the talks"

***July 25***: A Reuters report datelined Colombo, July 25, quoted in the *Asian Age* of July 26, says:

> **"Sri Lankan housewife Amirthalingam Kalaichelvi was relaxing on a warm September evening last year when the police barged into her home. Thrown into a detention centre with her family, the then pregnant 28-year old said she confessed to being a suicide bomber for separatist Tamil Tiger rebels after listening to guards beating her husband to a pulp with metal rods and threaten to stick pins into the ears of her twin toddlers.** "It was a torture chamber", the young woman, tears rolling down her cheeks the colour of sunbaked brick, told Reuters in a women's prison in the capital of Colombo. "I had no idea why I was arrested, no idea what was written in my confession". Ms.Kalaichelvi, an ethnic minority Tamil said she was told the confession would secure her release but instead she endured hours of beatings with sand-filled plastic pipes until she miscarried on the floor of a dingy, window-less cell.
>
> "Held under Sri Lanka's Prevention of Terrorism Act, Ms.Kalaichelvi and her three-year old twin sons spent two months in the detention centre before being moved to a women's prison, a large compound shared with about 300 prisoners behind an eight-metre wall, where she waits for a court hearing.
>
> **"Politicians and human rights groups say the young mother is among hundreds of people, mostly Tamils, who languish in over-crowded jails on confessions extracted under torture and even rape while waiting years to face a judge"**



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***July 31:*** Sri Lanka rolls out a red-carpet welcome for Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf. He was given a 21-gun salute at the airport before being driven into the city. Pakistan was one of the countries that offered prompt military supplies to help Sri Lanka avert the LTTE threat to take back Jaffna in the year 2000.

***August 6***: Japanese ambassador to Sri Lanka Mr.Seichiro Otsuka meets Mr.Thamilselvan at Kilinochchi. The talks that lasted two hours were described as "very cordial and productive". Mr.Otsuka was accompanied by Ms.Noriko Iseki, First Secretary for Economic Co-operation and Mr.S.A.S.Devotta, Senior assistant for Political Affairs. (Tamilnet, Aug.6)

***August 22:*** U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage tours war-ravaged Jaffna and says "*I have served six years in Vietnam and it is very much similar. Enough is enough. You have to settle your differences in a peaceful manner*". Mr.Armitage was the most senior US official to visit Jaffna since the war began.

***August 23:*** Norwegian-brokered formal peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE will open in Thailand on September 16, the Oslo government announced. The first round of negotiations would be conducted from September 16 – 18. The announcement came as US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage left Colombo after promising that Washington would push the island's peace bid "forcefully" (*AFP,* Colombo)

***September 2***: A peaceful demonstration by a crowd of 2,000, including school children protesting at the army's occupation of the Hartley College buildings at Point Pedro turns violent. The soldiers while denying public access to the roads around the camp and the jetty alongside, had also been using the amenities in the school such as the well and the school toilets, on the plea that the area was a "High Security" zone. The demonstration which was announced the previous day was organized by the Vadamarachchi People's Movement. Some of the protesters are reported to have approached the headquarters of the army's 52-4 brigade, pelted stones, set fire to sentry

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points and road blocks manned by the army and smashed up parts of the building. The crowds were dispersed by tear gas and shots fired in the air. Both Hartley College and the Methodist girls' school were closed for four days as a security measure.

***September 3:*** In Colombo JVP holds mass rally denouncing the lifting of the ban on the LTTE.

***September 5***: The 4-year old ban on the LTTE is lifted at midnight.

***September 16:*** **The first face-to-face talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in seven years gets under way with speeches by Sri Lanka' Constitutional Affairs Minister G.L.Peiris and LTTE's chief negotiator Anton Balasingham at a beachside hotel on the edge of the resort town of Pattaya in Thailand. Bangkok-based diplomats and members of the media were present. Norway, which brokered the February cease-fire was represented by Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen and Eric Solheim.**

The three days of peace talks were held at the high security naval base at Sattahip in Thailand. *Tamil Net* `reporting on the press conference given by the government and the LTTE at the end of the first round of peace talks quoted LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham as saying (in answering reporters' questions whether the LTTE had give up fighting for a separate state) :-

> "The LTTE doesn't operate with the concept of a separate state. We operate with the concept of a homeland and self-determination. Homeland does not mean a separate state as such. It refers to a territory where the Tamil-speaking people live. When we use the category or concept of self-determination, we mean that the concept entails substantial autonomy or self-government in our homeland or in the historical areas where we live. And we feel that solutions can be worked out if both parties agree to a particular political system or model".

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**"But if our demand for regional autonomy and self-government is rejected and if conditions of oppression continue, as a last resort our people have no option other than to fight for political independence and statehood. That will be the last resort under the principle of self-determination".**

Asked by a correspondent if Mr.Balasingham's comments gave him hopes, Sri Lankan governments' chief negotiator G.L.Peiris said:

"Definitely. We know that separation is not their objective. They have stated it categorically on this occasion. A separate state is not what their aspirations are about. Their aspirations can be fulfilled within one country if we set about it in the proper way."

Responding to a question whether the disarming of the LTTE was discussed at the 3-day talks, Mr.Peiris said:

"At the beginning of a negotiating process you don't ask about disarmament. You have to achieve some progress with regard to substantive issues first and decommissioning of weapons or demilitarization would come at a later stage. That is how any pragmatic negotiation process would be handled"

Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauff Hakeem who was present at the first round of talks when asked by the Sunday Times (Sept.22) how he saw the outcome of the talks, said :

"A positive and conducive climate has been built for various reasons. One important factor from our perspective is that the Muslims have been endorsed as an important partner for lasting peace. Having participated in the first round, I observed that there is an understanding among all involved to try and accommodate differences of opinion without trying to insist

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> on entrenched positions. This does not mean that parties have compromised. What is evident is there is willingness to look for imaginative creative approaches to resolve the conflict..."

Frances Bulathsinghala reporting for the *Sunday Observer* (Sept. 22) wrote:

> "One accusation leveled by the LTTE for the failure of peace talks in 1995 under President Kumaratunge was the lack of a "personalized dialogue with the people who mattered in the government..... These are men of high calibre to whom we are talking this time. The discussions are bound to reach a settlement for a lasting peace" Balasingham said, paying tribute to the four Government representatives, Minister of Science and Technology Milinda Moragoda, head of the UNF Government's peace secretariat Ambassador Bernard Gunatilleke, Minister of Muslim Affairs Rauf Hakeem and head of the Government peace team Minister of Constitutional Affairs, Professor G.L.Peiris.

***September 28:*** Exchange of prisoners by the LTTE and the Government. The LTTE releases the last seven prisoners of war (POW) in return for 13 LTTE cadres held in the south. Notable among those released by the LTTE was Commodore Ajith Boyagoda who was held in captivity for eight years. He was the commanding officer of the Sri Lankan navy ship "Sagarawardene" the largest battleship Sri Lanka had at the time when attacked by the LTTE on September 16, 1994. The most prominent of the released LTTE cadres was Jesumy Fernando ("Kennedy") who had reportedly destroyed an aircraft at the Palaly airport in 1994. The exchange took place at Omanthai in the presence of relatives of the government prisoners and high-powered delegations from both sides. Defence Secretary Austin Fernando who led the government delegation had the co-operation of the deputy head of the LTTE's political wing Puli Thevan in negotiating the release.

***October 10:*** The LTTE observe Tamil Women's Day, which commemorates

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the death of its first female cadre, Malathy, with an impressive march-past by women Tigers. A crowd of nearly 40,000 is reported to have thronged the venue

***October 12:*** A "hartal" and a day of mourning called by the LTTE in protest against the killing of 10 Tamil civilians in Kanchirankudah and three others in Trincomalee and an earlier assault on an unarmed local LTTE political wing leader by the police Special Task Force at Kanchirankudah in the East, paralyses life in the entire north and east. Enraged by the news of the assault on the LTTE leader, demonstrators numbering over a thousand are reported to have marched towards the STF camp at Kanchirankudah, when they were fired upon. According to *Sunday Times* (Oct.13) "the movement of government forces in Jaffna was virtually blocked with burning tyres and logs put across the access road to the main Palaly military complex". According to Tamil Net, the assailants behind the grenade attack on the three Tamil civilians in Trincomalee were reportedly Sinhalese paramilitary personnel.

***October 14:*** Anton Balasingham and wife Adele arrive in the Vanni for political discussions ahead of the second round of peace talks scheduled to begin on October 31. From Colombo international airport they were taken by a Sri Lankan Air Force helicopter to Puthukudiyiruppu in Mullaitivu where they were received by Thamilselvan, Soosai and police chief Nadesan.

***October 15:*** British M.P.s Gareth Thomas and Robert Evans, Member of the European Parliament tour Jaffna, and in the Vanni had discussion with S.P.Thamilselvan.

***October 23:*** An Israeli-built Sri Lankan Air Force Kfir fighter jet crashes in Kuliyapitiya while on a training mission. The pilot who said the engine ceased to function in mid-air, ejected safely.

***October 23:*** The Norwegian delegation to the Vanni headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen discuss with the LTTE leadership "crucial

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issues pertaining to the formation of the joint task force" for economic development and reconstruction of the northeast, according to Tamil Net of this date. The agenda for the second round of talks to be held in Thailand was also discussed.

***October 29:*** A nine-member LTTE team leaves Colombo for the second round of talks in Thailand. The members of the delegation were Anton Balasingham, Adele Balasingham, Thamilselvan, Muralitharan Vinayagamoorthy (Col.Karuna), V.Rudrakumaran, and Dr.Jay Maheswaran. Three aides, Sivapalan, Sivaparan and Muthukumaru accompanied the delegation

***October 30:*** A Muslim-Sinhalese clash over the construction of a new mosque close to a Buddhist temple at Maligawatte in Colombo results in the destruction of at least 20 properties. Several vehicles were also set on fire. A local curfew was imposed.

***November 3 :*** The 4-day long second phase of the first round of peace talks ended at the Rose Garden resort in Thailand's Nakhon Pathom, with a "mixed bag of developments and surviving a fresh acid test following a court order sentencing LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran to 200 years in Jail" said a report by Anthony David in the *Sunday Times* of November 3. The report said:-

> "As the government delegation and the LTTE were finalizing details on resolving the problems in the East, the news about the verdict on the Central Bank bombing case reached the delegates on Thursday evening. The issue about the impact of the judgment on the current peace process turned out to be the question posed to the government and the LTTE. Sri Lankan delegation chief Prof.G.L.Peiris downplayed the issue saying he saw no reason that the talks should be affected. But, LTTE's chief negotiator Anton Balasingham reacted sharply saying it could affect the spirit of the peace process adding that **"if Sri**



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**Lankan leaders are tried before our courts for war crimes committed during the past, they would be sentenced to 2000 years"**

The 200-year verdict was however pushed to the background as more important issues came up for discussion, particularly the aid pledging conference to be held in Oslo on November 25. The proposed Joint Task Force to oversee humanitarian and rehabilitation needs was jettisoned and instead a "sub committee on immediate humanitarian and rehabilitation needs in the northeast" was to be set up. It will be co-headed by Peace Secretariat Director Bernard Gunatilleke and LTTE's Thamilselvan. A collective development plan was to be mapped out to be taken to the Sri Lanka Aid Group meeting in Oslo.

***November 15:*** President Chandrika Kumaratunga's People's Alliance issues a statement expressing concern over the peace process. The statement said:

> "It is reported the Government of the United States of America and the United Kingdom, both of which have proscribed the LTTE or declared it a terrorist organization will be represented at a high political level in the presence of the LTTE as an equal partner…the signals that will go out from Oslo is that terrorism will in fact be rewarded when the interests of certain donor countries merge with the interests of terrorist groups…"

The U.S. delegation to Oslo was to be headed by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, and the U.K. delegation by the Secretary of State for International Development Ms.Clare Short. U.S.ambassador in Colombo Ashley Wills was quick to assure Mrs.Kumaratunge there was no question of the U.S. delegation to Oslo shaking hands with members of the LTTE delegation or sitting at the same table with them. (Iqbal Athas, *Sunday Times*, November 24).

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***November 23:*** LTTE open their own law court for the Amparai-Batticaloa district at Arasadithivu.

***November 25:*** Thirty five countries ranging from Australia to Iceland meet at Oslo to pledge support for the Sri Lankan peace process. British Minister Clare Short struck a positive note by calling for the building of a practical mechanism to translate urgent assistance to Sri Lanka into tangible benefits to the people. She said that at a time when war clouds gather elsewhere in the world, it was a pleasure to be at a meeting where parties to a long-standing conflict were heading towards a resolution. .U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, as was expected, called on the LTTE to renounce terrorism and violence and make clear that it has abandoned its armed struggle for a separate state. All speakers at the opening session showered plaudits on Norway for its peace-making efforts around the world, particularly in Sri Lanka. The host for the meeting, Norwegian Foreign Minister Jan Petersen said the international community have now shown that they are "walking beside Sri Lanka" on the path to peace. (Arjuna Ranawana, *Daily News*) **India, unlike the U.S. and U.K., finding itself unable to get over its "legal constraints" of having proscribed the LTTE was the most prominent non-participant at the conference. It had to be satisfied by having ambassador to Oslo Gopal Gandhi seated among the audience.**

Addressing the conference, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe said:

> "The challenges for the Government extend indeed to meet the needs of not only the ravages of war in the North-East, but also to the damage it caused to our entire economy. In all parts of the country and to every section of the Sri Lankan community the war had brought distress and dislocation. In short, the country's economy has been shattered. …The conflict has dragged our economy to near bankruptcy. Last year, for the first time in independent Sri Lanka we recorded negative growth…."

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***November 25:*** **An all Sinhala jury acquits Mylanthanai accused.** All the eighteen accused in the Mylanthanai massacre case were acquitted by the High Court judge Mr.S.Sriskandarajah when the Sinhalese-speaking jury brought a unanimous verdict of not guilty. In this case the Attorney General had indicted eighteen Sinhalese soldiers of the Sri Lankan army with the murder of thirty-five Tamil civilians, including fourteen children in the Mylanthanai village in Batticaloa district on August 9, 1992. ....The High Court judge told the jury that he was not satisfied with their verdict and asked them to retire once again and conduct fresh deliberations. But the jury saw no reason to change their verdict and the judge acquitted all the accused. The massacre took place in Mylanthanai on the day Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa and seven other senior commanders died in a landmine attack in the Jaffna peninsula. (Tamil Net, Nov.25)

***November 27:*** LTTE leader Velupillai Pirabhakaran in his annual "Maveerar Naal" (Heroes Day) speech made on "Voice of Tigers" radio said: (extracts)

> "Our liberation struggle has reached a new historical turning point and entered into a new developmental stage. We are facing a new challenge. We have ceased armed hostilities and are now engaged in a peaceful negotiation process to resolve the ethnic conflict. Our sincere and dedicated commitment to the peace process has falsified and demolished the propaganda campaign carried out by Sinhala chauvinists that we are enemies of peace.
>
> "Even on the issue of ceasefire, we took the initiative. We declared a unilateral cease-fire and called upon the government to reciprocate. The new government that assumed power with a mandate for peace reciprocated positively to our declaration of ceasefire. The mutually agreed cessation of hostilities came into effect on February 23 under the supervision of an

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international monitoring team. This ceasefire has been in force for the past nine months. There have been several provocative attempts by certain elements of the armed forces and anti-peace racist forces to disrupt the peace process. There were incidents in which several innocent Tamils were killed. Nevertheless, we maintained a rigid discipline and observed peace.... If a reasonable settlement to the Tamil national question could be realized by peaceful means, we will make every endeavour, with honesty and sincerity to pursue that path. Our political objective is to ensure that our people should live in freedom and dignity in their homeland enjoying the right to self-rule."

"The objective of our struggle is based on the concept of self-determination as articulated in the UN charter and other instruments.... The right to self-determination has two aspects; internal and external. The internal self-determination entitles a people to regional self-rule....But if our people's right to self-determination is denied and our demand for regional self-rule is rejected, we have no alternative other than to secede and form an independent state. **It is the politics of the Sinhala nation that will eventually determine whether the Sinhalese could peacefully co-exist with the Tamils or to compel the Tamils to secede..."**

***November 29:*** Making a statement on the Oslo Peace Support Conference, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe said:

"....For the first time the LTTE affirmed to the international community its commitment to find a negotiated political solution to the ethnic conflict. This is a significant achievement. The Support meeting also pledged financial support for reconstruction. The usual practice is to provide financial aid after a peace agreement is reached, but realizing that peace is

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people driven in Sri Lanka, the international community has decided to provide financial assistance as the talks progress. Financial assistance for Sri Lanka will be finalised at a meeting of donor nations and multi-lateral financial institutions to be summoned in Tokyo by the Japanese government. The visit I will undertake to Japan from 3rd to 7th December will bring in its wake substantive benefits to our country. The Government of Japan has already extended an invitation to the parties to select Tokyo as a venue for their monthly discussions in March next year. My government has accepted this invitation with pleasure." (*Sunday Times*, Dec.1)

***December 5:*** **U.S. salutes both SLG and the Tigers on peace deal.** Washington, Dec.6: The United States has saluted the Sri Lankan Government, Tamil Tiger rebels and facilitator Norway for reaching an historic peace deal to end a brutal two decades of civil war. State Department deputy spokesman Philip Reeker said :

"The United States regards as extremely positive the announcement that the two sides have made progress in discussing political issues by agreeing to work to establish a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka. We salute both sides and the Norwegian government for moving the peace process forward" (AFP)

***December 6:*** Under the headline – **"Sri Lanka and Tamil Tigers ready to end 19-year war and share power"** *The Times,* London, of this date reports:-

"Sri Lanka and Tamil Tiger rebels agreed yesterday to pursue a peace deal giving regional autonomy to rebel-held areas in an attempt to bring an end to almost two decades of civil war. The break-through deal was announced in a joint declaration ending four days of talks between the two sides in Oslo with

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Norwegian mediators. A draft statement said that the "parties have decided to explore a political solution founded on internal self-determination based on a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka". Both sides pledged to continue with the existing ceasefire and agreed new but unspecified "concrete measures" towards further de- escalation, although there was no mention of decommissioning. Such a fundamental change to Sri Lanka's constitution will require approval by a two-thirds majority in parliament which the government does not command. The agreement came exactly a year after Ranil Wickremasinghe, the Prime Minister, came to power on a mandate to negotiate peace, but his efforts have been repeatedly opposed by political rivals, including President Kumaratunge, who is opposed to giving what she sees as too much ground to the rebels...."

***December 29:*** "Though the war has been absent for the past one year, there has not been a significant reduction in the number of desertions", reports *Sunday Times*, quoting military spokesman Sanath Karunaratne. According to the spokesman, 4,678 military personnel, including 43 officers, deserted the army during 2002 while the figures for 2000 and 2001 were 4,985 and 5,902.

The year 2002 ends in an uncertain note about the future of the peace process, with both President Kumaratunga and the Indian Government giving negative signals.

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# Chapter 36

## A Memoir 1993 – 2004: That unseen hand that dictates one's life!

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# A Memoir 1993 – 2004: That unseen hand that dictates one's life!

It was late autumn 2004 when my friend "G" who went through the manuscript of my book pointed out something that I had failed to realize myself. "Look", he said, "you have sub-titled your book – A Journalist's Memoirs. Won't your readers wonder as to what happened to you from 1993 till now?". An unexplained gap of 11 years! As it often happens in life, it was a case of missing the obvious. 2004 was to me a year that was full of anxieties. I was 74 and had fallen victim to Myeloma as well; cancer of the bone marrow, the doctors said. Cancer is a word that has an unpleasant connotation to many ears, so I took comfort in the fact that it was a musical sounding affliction anyway. Besides, I seemed to have developed, among other ailments, what is known as Writer's Cramp. Having to live with constant deadlines could be agonising, but living without them, rust could settle on the mind. Life was getting torn between conflicts. There was the need to see this book in print but there were also immigration laws and visa problems to worry about. Above all, there was a compelling yearning to escape from the synthetic life of the West and its unfriendly winters. Get back to the land of your birth, said my inner self, however sordid the state of the land is. A man's life, after all, should end where it began.

The theme of a book that I had read during my young years began to haunt me in my thoughts. It was American author Ernest Hemingway's *"The Old Man and the Sea* ". The old man had at last landed a big fish. A really big one. A fishing triumph. Exultation! The problem was, he did not have the strength to bring the fish ashore, so big was his catch. With the help of

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a small boy, he laboured to drag it ashore. But all his feeling of triumph became short lived as sharks began attacking the fish all the way. When journey's end was reached, all what was left of the fish were mere bones. That story kept recurring in my consciousness in my waking hours. As to why, I could not fathom.

The last time I took a conscious decision and took control of my life was in end 1981. That meant saying Goodbye to Colombo where I had worked for 30 years to move to Jaffna and launch the *Saturday Review* in January 1982. I cannot remember any single occasion during the following twenty three years, unbelievable it would seem, when anything happened according to my wishes or plans. An unseen hand - divine or diabolical? – had taken me by the scruff of my neck and led me to places I never wanted to go and to experiences that I never bargained for. Forced to leave Jaffna by a midnight country boat on an illegal crossing to the Indian coast in 1983, spending an year in two jails in Tamil Nadu, virtually forced out of India on a Air India flight to Singapore in January 1993, were the bad patches. But there were good times as well. It was like playing the children's game of Snakes and Ladders. With one throw of the dice the ladder takes you to the top of the board, but the next throw sees you slipping down the snake to the very bottom.

Leaving India, the two weeks I spent in Singapore as a guest of the amiable golf-addicted Dr.G.Kamalanathan – he was Co-Professor of Mechanical Engineering at the Nanyang University – came as a tonic and a restorative. I felt I had been unshackled and led away to freedom in the big, wide world. There was a flurry of telephone calls from relieved friends, family and relatives from all over. At the end of the two weeks' visa, it meant moving again, flying Singapore Airlines to Hong Kong. My host in the British-run Hong Kong of that time was "Tom" Sivananthan, another old friend. Siva was an engineer working for the Hong Kong government. He was Malaysian-born, educated at St.Thomas', Colombo, and carried a British passport A connoisseur and devotee of Indian Carnatic music, an

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amateur violin player himself, he was the self-appointed guardian of the little but active music world of Hong Kong, consisting of about a dozen Indian Brahmin ladies including one exceptionally gifted singer called Suja. Out of the earshot of those ladies I used to refer to them as "Siva's musical harem". In Hong Kong, it meant a longer stay, being blessed with a 3-month visa on arrival and later extended with an additional half a month.

Hong Kong life, as it was in Singapore, was pleasant enough, but my wife and two daughters were yet in India, with no hope of my returning there. Getting back to Sri Lanka was inadvisable, particularly after remembering what the genial Professor Peter Schalk of Uppsala University in Sweden once told me. Peter was one of those foreign academics who were deeply involved in Tamil affairs. Once when I was running the Tamil Information Centre in Madras, he called on me for a chat and said he was flying to Sri Lanka the following day. The third day, he was back at my office. "Siva, don't ever try going to Colombo", he said, heaving his bulk into the chair opposite. To my anxious enquiry he told me what happened. At the Colombo airport, the immigration official had looked at his passport, after which he began turning the pages of a list containing names of people. He peeped over, saw his name on the list, and right behind his, in alphabetical order, was mine. He was of course refused entry and took the next flight back to Madras. It was obviously some "black list" of "undesirable" persons. But then, the year was 1986, when Jayewardene was yet in power. Times had changed, but it yet left me with the need to find some country to take me in.

Friends in Australia led by a priest, Rev. Wootton, an espouser of the Tamil cause whom I had never the pleasure of knowing in person, were busy trying to get me entry into Australia. He sent me a schedule of talks to be given by me in Australian universities and community gatherings, along with a strong letter recommending my visit visa. Armed with all that, I went to the Australian legation in Hongkong island, but they said Sorry, as a mere legation, they could not help and advised me to go to the Australian embassy in Colombo. So that shut out hopes of Australia and New Zealand.

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Meanwhile, my friends of the Tamil Forum in London were getting concerned over my future as well as the future of their baby – the fortnightly *Tamil Nation*. With my ending up in jail in India, the paper had ceased publication. Somehow, governments and I are never fated to live in peaceful cohabitation. ( President Chandrika had the same problem with the UNP in Sri Lanka). The *Saturday Review* in Jaffna was banned after only one and a half years of its turbulent life. The *Tamil Nation's* life span in Madras was even shorter. Lawyer Nadesan Satyendra, who was himself a member of the Tamil Forum, was persuaded by his colleagues to take over the editorship despite his other commitments. He took up the task bravely, putting more fire into the paper, but on condition that it was a stopgap arrangement until I surfaced in London. But how am I supposed to surface in London? My Sri Lankan passport was not going to be of any help. Unknown to me, my London friends took a desperate gamble. They paid good money to a man in Colombo who had styled himself as a "Travel Agent". The man had assured them that I would be with them in London soon, with a possible 2-week stay in Lusaka in Zambia. Why Lusaka of all places? When my friends phoned me in Hong Kong and asked me to fly back to Singapore where I would be met by a mysterious "someone", I showed my resentment. But the realization also came to me that it was no good resenting anything done by my friends who had stood by me through thick and thin. They were after all, like me, unconscious instruments of that same unseen hand that was dictating the course of my life. I took a Cathay Pacific flight back to Singapore. My adventures had begun again.

What was intended was certainly not a desirable way of trying to enter another country. Of course not. But if your own country, the one in which you were born and bred, where your Tamil forefathers have lived for centuries, cannot assure you the freedom of life, not because you were a criminal, but merely because your views as a journalist and writer are unpalatable to the ears of the government in power, what does a human being do under such circumstances? Where was the moral obligation to abide by laws, when the laws are always loaded against you?

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Cathay Pacific was the third international airline to carry me within six months, but there were more to come. From Singapore, I flew Alitalia to Bangkok (transit) and from there by Ethiopian Airways to Addis Ababa (another transit.) I had no idea whatEthiopia looked like but I remembered it was around that time that the country had emerged out of a twenty year old separatist war, with northern Eritrea emerging as an independent nation. Ethiopia was always a country with a poverty image but a Guardian travel-writer who visited the country recently (2004) says Addis Ababa is one of Africa's most surprising and cosmopoliton cities. Having got over its debilitating separatist war and having got Eritrea off its back, Ethiopia's fortune had made a quick turnaround. (Is there some moral in it for Sri Lanka?)

From Addis Ababa I flew by another Ethiopian Airways flight to Harare in Zimbabwe via Bombay. Many Indians got into the plane at Bombay and very good, hot vegetarian food was served in the plane. Tickets and boarding passes for my complicated air journey were provided in advance, but as to how 'T', my 'travel Agent', once a semi-educated kachcheri clerk in Mannar managed all these will remain a matter of wonder. When I came face to face with the man for the first time in Zambia later, he told me, "Uncle, I have been to sixty countries in the world". I found no reason to disbelieve him. If someone wants to know what makes a Jaffna man tick, here was a good specimen. Meanwhile, this was a continuous 48-hour air travel, day and night, with the added responsibility of looking after T's elderly father who scarcely touched any food on the flights and a young fellow who spoke very little. They were my two travel companions from Singapore and neither of them knew any English.

Harare provided the first real stop. A 'sub-agent' met us and we were escorted to a modest hotel. We had Indian menu for dinner and a good night's sleep, but next morning we were off again by an Air Zimbabwe flight to Lusaka in Zambia. A funny way to get to Lusaka, but there we were. Lusaka provided another surprise. There were two houses rented out and already

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occupied by nearly 30 young men and women with destinations ranging from France, Germany, Switzerland to the U.K. Most young women were on their way to meet either their husbands or their future husbands, and they all seemed to be in good cheer. Cooking was done by the inmates themselves from provisions supplied by the "agency". The two weeks promised by 'T' to my London friends lengthened to three months, with London nowhere near the horizon, and "T" himself nowhere in sight.

And then one day, the man arrived. He shook hands with me, pleasantly enough, and asked me to get ready for a motor trip to the south of Zambia. To my pleasant surprise, it turned out to be the tourist area of Livingstone, named after the 19th century Scottish missionary explorer David Livingstone. We booked into a moderately good hotel and the next morning set out to view the Victoria Falls, the world's second largest, next to the Niagara. (Do I sound like a care-free jet set tourist?). I was told the view from the Zimbabwean side was even better. But why think about it? The same evening we were off again on the move, by river for a short distance, and then on a pot-holed road carried on an open jalopy with the fierce African sun beating down on us, the sand dust adding to our misery. We were heading for a border town in another African country, Namibia. Zambia is a land-locked country bordering seven countries and Namibia was one of them linked by a tongue of river. Fresh surprises awaited me. We were booked into a tourist garden hotel, 3-star by my reckoning. The calm waters of the river Zambesi flowed by, adding to the charm of the place. Spending one week in those idyllic surroundings made me forget for a while that I was a wanderer and a refugee looking for safety and asylum away in the West. For once it gave me the illusion of being a genuine tourist with my empty purse bursting with dollars!

Gathering my wits, I asked myself, What was I doing in unfamiliar Africa, in the company of this man 'T', whom I had never heard of before - (the type I wouldn't have wanted to know anyway), his elderly illiterate father - ("What is there to see in these waterfalls?") and a nondescript young fellow, none of whom had a clear idea as to who I was. What was the point in asking

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myself that question? Had I known the answer, I wouldn't be there anyway. The next part of my travel experience made me think of 'T' with a little more respect. He told me we were going to leave for Windhoek, the Namibian capital the next morning. We will get an air taxi, he said, with a nonchalant air that explorer Livingstone would have envied.

It was a 20-seater plane. It had a low roof, forcing us to bend our heads to walk to our seats. Except the four of us, all other sixteen passengers were whites, and so were the two-man crew. A curtain separated the two pilots from the passengers, but as the plane gained height and got tossed by the wind, the curtain too flapped to and fro revealing the motionless figures of the two pilots. It was not the kind of flight for anyone with a nervous disposition. At times the plane dipped and then soared like a bird in the sky. There were no air hostesses or cabin crew but we were compensated by a refreshments pack before entering the plane. There were three stops before we got to Windhoek, and at each stop we were rewarded with sandwiches and drink.

At Windhoek, we moved into a hotel called the Continental (not to be confused with the International Inter-continental). 'T' parked the three of us into a large room with three beds, and disappeared somewhere, probably on some probing mission, because from what I could gather, he was trying to send his father along with me by an Air Namibia flight to London. A little later, a room boy came and asked whether we had any clothes for laundry service. I had a suit made in Hong Kong, and a couple of good shirts which he said would be delivered 12 noon the next day. From the time I left Singapore I was travelling with only hand luggage (that was the instruction) and the crumpled suit and shirts badly needed laundering. Early next morning 'T' came with a bombshell. "Quick, pack your things," he said, "we are leaving for that border town in another hour. I have arranged a car to take us there". I told him about my precious suit and shirt and pleaded with him: "Can't we wait till noon?". He wouldn't budge. Something had obviously rattled him. Had he encountered a business rival? Had his plan been found out? Was the police after him? I did not know and didn't care to know.

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It was a long, tiresome drive, day and night, covering the same distance by road that the 20-seater bird brought us by air. There were long stretches of savannah jungle, miles and miles on end, interspersed with small towns on the way. It was dawn by the time we reached the border town again. Tired and exhausted as we were, there was no garden hotel this time. Another gruelling journey by that pot-holed road brought us and me half dead and angry, into Livingstone. As a young man, I had dreamed of visiting new countries and places, and going to exotic destinations, and here was that hand of Fate granting my wishes with a vengeance, at an age when the bones were beginning to creak.

We got back to Lusaka after a welcome night's stay in a hotel. Three months had long gone, since leaving Hong Kong and Singapore. I put on a brave face, writing regularly to my wife and daughters in India, who were probably now reconciled to the waywardness of my life. Then came another travel change. The young men and women at Lusaka were packed off across the border in buses and trains to Tanzania and to Kenya, while I flew into Nairobi the Kenyan capital with 'T', who was obviously embarrassed by his inability to keep his promise. But grant it to him, he had been trying hard up to that time; except that my going to London seemed to follow the same circuitous route as the Portuguese who were taken to meet the King of Kotte in the sixteenth century.

One never expected Nairobi to be looking that green, with even cut flowers bringing good export business to Kenya. Safari country and cut flowers made strange company and the roses were the largest I had seen anywhere. But whoever expected that my stay in Nairobi would last another nine months but that was exactly what happened! Being an English-speaking country and fond as I was of seeing places and watching the passing scene, I was never bored getting around on my own. But that was not the goal of my life. My London friends were beginning to get alarmed at the sudden lack of interest on the part of 'T'. He had apparently exhausted all the money paid to him, apart from being seriously embroiled in his own family quarrels.

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Meanwhile, Satyendra, living in faraway Cambridge and working single-handedly on the paper resented attempts to water down the paper's policy. He gave up editing *Tamil Nation* and Dr.Sorna, the General Practitioner was left holding the newspaper baby with the assistance of his nursing staff. Since he was a qualified obstetrician and gyneacologist earlier on, may be he used those skills to deliver a few issues of the paper from his surgery! He himself then concluded that enough was enough and himself flew into Nairobi one day. He moved me into a hotel and we spent two weeks together planning what could be done. Amazingly, this was the first time I was meeting Sorna in person. We had been so long in constant touch by letter and by telephone and having common friends, that one had the feeling I had known him long enough. There were eight other friends, the founders of *Tamil Nation* – Dr.Puvanendran, Dr.Rajan Namasivayam, Consultant Psychiatrist Dr.Sathananthan, Engineer Sarvananda, Lawyer and founder of *Tamil Nation* website Satyendra, Accountant Sanjeevirajan, famed Physics teacher Emmanuel and Engineer Ramachandran, none of whom, with the exception of Dr.Puvan (who was almost a life-long devoted friend) was known to me in person. It took me another five years to see them in the flesh.

It could not be said that my nine months in Nairobi were unpleasant, but these wanderings, parted from my family, from my friends, from the country I was trying to go to, was wearing me down. To lose two virtually wasted years since 1992, with age catching up, carrying the gnawing feeling that my lifework was still not done, was naturally getting me restive and frustrated. The upshot of it all, I managed to board an Air France flight from Nairobi to Paris with my Sri Lankan passport along with the air ticket provided by 'T' and landed there on the morning of June 5, 1994. London was yet eluding me but the atmosphere at Charles de Gaulle Airport lifted my spirits after one year of African aimlessness. What mattered most was that I had come to the West.

Thanks to the English speaking lady in charge at Terminal Two who gave me her own 'telecarte' I phoned Lawrence Thilagar. He was then the LTTE's



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man in charge of the International Secretariat in Paris. I had known Thilagar in Madras and after the closure of the Tamil Information Centre in 1987, he and Yogaratnam Yogi (then an up-and-coming figure in the movement) used to be regular visitors at my flat. I had declined Thilagar's friendly overtures to work for the movement, insisting on preserving my independence as a journalist. My unexpected presence in Paris made him grab me with both arms. He quickly arranged for a lawyer to speak to me at the terminal and within 36 hours I was whisked away from the airport with a week's visa and in due course granted political asylum.

In late 1995, I received my French refugee travel document that enables one to travel anywhere except to the country of origin. In December I found myself motoring with two friends to Calais, boarding a ferry and landing on the English coast seeing the 'white cliffs of Dover' of which I had read in some novel or other. I had at last stepped into England. There were many friends to meet, old friends and new and a host of relatives. Life was beginning to become hectic, both in France and the UK. In May 1966, I brought out the inaugural issue of *Hot Spring*, a monthly magazine rich in colour which I termed 'a journal of commitment'. Edited by me in Paris and ably laid out there by Miss.Runitha, it was printed in London and launched at a hotel there in the presence of more than a hundred invitees on May 14. The issue was rich in content with contributions from Adrian Wijemanne on 'The War of Tamil Independence', Rev.Dr.S.J.Emmanuel on the historic exodus of Jaffna of October 1995, Visvanathan Rudrakumaran on 'Criteria for a Solution' and Vasantha Rajah on the Government strategy, apart from many other features and photos in colour. The cover which carried the photo of a mock drama staged in Paris impersonating Chandrika and Ratwatte drew immediate publicity in Colombo. The *Sunday Times* reproduced the cover in its columns and the *Weekend Express* gave the journal extensive publicity. It was a good beginning but tragically after a successful five years of publication, the journal had to wind up in London through intrigue from within the movement.



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Earlier on August 22, 1996 I faced an unexpected blow. While working on an issue of *Hot Spring* one afternoon I developed sudden chest pains and began to sweat profusely. The signs were obvious. I was promptly rushed to the nearest hospital, 'Hospital Trinon'. Despite feeling weak and breathless, I had not lost consciousness. Thankfully, the doctor on emergency spoke good English. While being wheeled into Intensive Care, he told me they had to inject a drug to dissolve any clots in the arteries. The drug, which he named, was used only in France and the US. Had I any family members present whose formal permission could be sought ? I had none, so I told the doctor, "Please go ahead, I am in your hands". The next morning I found myself surprisingly feeling fit and ready to take on the world. But I was kept in Intensive care the next three days, undergoing various tests, including monitoring of my blood sugar levels. On the fourth day, I was transferred to a general ward and lo, I had a stream of visitors which lifted me from my hospital surroundings to the France I had known.

Efforts made by my friends both in France and India to get down my wife were running into bureacratic delays but on the 31st August, my son-in-law in London, Elangco arrived in Paris and stayed for two days. Dr.Sorna in London felt sorry for me that at a time like that I happened to be alone (not being aware that I had a little faithful Tamil following on my own in Paris) phoned to say he would come down at least 'to hold my hands'. But fate played a trick and he himself developed heart problems (could be sympathetic vibrations) and had to undergo by-pass surgery around the same time I had mine in France.

Mine was a triple by-pass. I was told that for purposes of surgery I would be transferred to another hospital, Hopital Henri Mondor. (In French, the letter 'H' at the beginning of the word is not pronounced and there being no 'S', so it is 'Opital') The surgery was to take place on 12th September and five days before that, on the 7th, I had my 66th birthday in bed. There was a series of telephone calls from Madras, Colombo, the Seychelles, the US and London, prayers for me, poojas in temples along with visitors, all of which cheered me no end.

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Life can throw many surprises, pleasant as well as unpleasant and I had enough of them the past twenty years. At the time I was facing surgery, in a foreign country, with no knowledge of the language, the unseen hand – a divine one no doubt – brought to my sick bed a French woman, who was to remain like a guardian angel for me. She was Chonthal, whom I had met briefly at the house of Chitra where I was lodged. Chitra was a nurse in Trincomalee with a talent for writing, but because of her suspected LTTE sympathies had fallen foul of the EPRLF during the IPKF days. She was helped to get out of the country by Medicines Sans Frontiers (MSF) doctors and find refuge in France, along with her husband and little son. But it was hard life for her when she arrived and Chonthal was one of those who helped her to find her feet.

There are some women in this world who derive emotional satisfaction in serving others and Chonthal was one of them. She had once done voluntary service at Mother Theresa's 'Missionaries of Charity' in Calcutta and that explained it. When I was taken by ambulance from 'Hopital Trinon' to 'Hopital Henri Mondor' for my surgery, Chonthal left her car behind and accompanied me in the ambulance. She was a constant visitor at my bedside at both hospitals and when I was transferred to a third for what they call in French 'Reanimation', she was there too.

Meanwhile when I was brought back to 'Hopital Trinon' after my surgery, my wife phoned to say that her visit visa had been refused. It had meant three journeys for her from Madras to Pondichchery. (The French hung on symbolically to their old enclave even fifty years after it became part of independent India.) But it mattered little, now that I had survived the crisis. There was enough comfort to be had from regular phone calls and constant visitors among whom was my sister-in-law Radha from London and her doctor friend Dr.Deva. One surprise visitor was an old friend Dr.Ramamurthy of Quaker Peace who stayed back for quite a long chat ruminating over political developments in Sri Lanka.

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My third hospital for 'reanimation' was 'Hopital de Bligny' – a long, long way out of Paris. It was a virtual Rest Home cum hospital, cosily tucked away among surrounding woods. Chonthal was with me again in the ambulance. She introduced me to the nurses and the elderly woman librarian at 'Bibliothque & Relais' who managed to fish out a collection of Modern Short Stories in English. I spent nearly a month in the Home, the librarian bringing me a couple of more English books and past numbers of *National Geographic* magazines. Visitors were fewer but with a bedside telephone and TV (the only amenities for which I had to pay) I was relaxed and happy. 'Kinetherapic' at the Gym was three days in the week and the instructor naturally spoke only French. One day an elderly lady in the group saw me struggling with the language, came up and offered to translate for me the instructions in English. She turned out to be an American named Rose. The light in her eyes showed that it was as much her pleasure as it was mine. Later, I found out why.

Rose always sought my company. She said she lived alone in a studio flat in Crimee in Paris and walked to her place of work a mile away. She looked and sounded like one of those lonely derelicts who had ended up in another country, but for some reason or other could not go back to her own. I could not help deep down a fellow feeling for her. One day, while taking a long walk in the woods towards the end of my stay, she suddenly stopped and said, "Siva, do you know what pleasure it was to have your company? There was not a soul around for a long time to whom I could speak in English. Discovering you, was like an act of deliverance". I realised then there was more to it than the mere expression 'mother tongue'. When I gave her a 2-day old copy of the American daily *The International Herald Tribune* which Chonthal had brought me, her pleasure was endless.

It was towards the end of my stay at 'Hopital de Bligny' that something happened to upset the tenor of life of the Tamil community in Paris. It was a double murder by shooting and it happened in an area which was the very centre of Tamil activity in Paris – La Chappelle. The victims were both well

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known; Nathan, who I believe was in charge of LTTE funds in France and Gajan, the young, promising writer and founder editor of the Tamil daily *Eelamurasu*, whom I knew fairly well. From later hearsay reports I was to learn that the intended victim was really Nathan and that Gajan paid the price for being with him. If that was true there must have been someone with knowledge of the crime and possibly eye witnesses too. What happened to them? Was the identity of the assassin known? Had he decamped from the country? Was he a Tamil agent of the Sri Lankan government? There were various kinds of speculation and gossip but even the French police known for their efficiency said nothing. What happened on that autumn evening of the 26th October was to bring about changes in the lives of many people, including mine! Why mine? Well, that is the way, as the Yankee expression goes, 'the cookie crumbles'.

Many developments followed. The International Secretariat of the LTTE was closed down, Thilagar was recalled to Vanni and there was a kind of enveloping gloom. I found myself in a state of limbo. The future of *Hot Spring* was worrying me, not that I was a paid editor. It was always a labour of love. Despite the backing I got from the LTTE, the journal was born out of a personal rapport I had with Thilagar and the confidence he placed in me. Not once did he want to probe into what went into every issue. Like any reader he saw only the finished product that came out of the press. While I pondered what to do, the decision was taken off my hands. "Why not base the journal in London?", it was suggested.

There was no question that London was the proper place for an English publication. In fact *Hot Spring* printing was always done there. But there was the question of logistics. Apart from finding a suitable office and someone to do the layout, how do I manage the editing based in France? The transition was not smooth, there were hiccups all the way, but things worked out eventually. It meant of course my shuttling between Paris and London but I had two human assets to work with in London, Bala and young Parthipan. Bala who worked at the post office freely gave all his spare time to help *Hot*

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*Spring*. He willingly assumed many roles, as PR man, advertising manager, subscription canvasser and distributor. Parthi who proved to have an innate talent for designing and layout was the office anchorman as well. He also used to drive me around in his aged Vauxall car.

Apart from the US Embassy in Colombo and the librarian of the Peradeniya University who both showed keen interest in subscribing to *Hot Spring*, we made no sales in Colombo. But we seemed to have readers, and in plenty, apart from the widespread interest in the journal among media and political circles. Since the objective was to project the Tamil cause, we sent complimentary copies to editors, some politicos, and to all important embassies in Colombo. But even those to whom we never sent copies seemed to have access to *Hot Spring*. Our valued contributor Shanika de Silva had an explanation.He was aware, he said, of one copy going from hand to hand reaching several people.

We were also cheered by the fact of being generously quoted by the Colombo Press, both from the contents and from our editorial comments. While it was no surprise to find the *Weekend Express* carrying long extracts from Adrian Wijemanne's "The War of Tamil Independence" in our inaugural issue in 1996, it was flattering to find *The Hindu* in Madras condescending to give space to a *Hot Spring* editorial. In its issue of February 3rd 1997 the paper carried a 3-column headline that read, "Chandrika has failed, says pro-LTTE journal" and kept quoting extensively from my editorial in the issue of August 1996, written six months earlier! The report was published under the by-line of its Colombo correspondent Amit Baruah who was not on our mailing list. As Shanika said that particular issue must have taken six months to go from hand to hand to reach Amit Baruah's hands! He however got over the problem neatly by saying, "in a recent issue" of the journal. By some coincidence *India Today* magazine pulled out one sentence from the same editorial and published in its "Quotes" page around the same time.

Perhaps there was a good reason why that particular issue earned special attention. It had a photograph of LTTE leader Pirabhakaran on the cover

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with a caption below that said, "Sri Lanka: He sets the agenda". The editorial comment inside was headlined, "The man in the Driving Seat". The fact is, whether one likes the man or not, his name is good copy for a newsman. If one counts the number of times his name figured in the columns of Colombo newspapers over the past two decades, they could run into millions. Half the comments could be highly critical of him, some of them even downright abusive, some others could be wishful thinking as when Kadirgamar told *India Abroad* in an exclusive interview as early as 1997 that Pirabhakaran was, "fighting for his life", or they could be prophecies of doom for the man. But it became impossible to run a newspaper without bringing the man's name in!

There was no doubt that ever since *Hot Spring* began publication in Paris in 1996 it had a steady rise in prestige and popularity among English-speaking western Tamil expatriates. It had even caught the interest of Western academics and intellectuals who were concerned with Sri Lanka issues. But publications cannot be run on the basis of popularity. One needs hard cash. As long as I had the backing of the LTTE International Secretariat under Thilagar the problem of cash was never felt. But the move to London placed me at the mercy of small men "dressed in brief authority" who never made me forget that they were the men who held the purse strings. I could understand that frame of mind. They wanted to impress on the community that they exercised control of the journal but they did not know how to go about it. They knew that any direct interference regarding policy or contents would make me throw the whole thing away. My standing in the community as an editor, as a writer and as an activist in the Tamil cause did not depend on *Hot Spring's* continued publication. So there were pinpricks, manipulations behind the scenes and complaints about the costs in running the journal. The crisis point was reached at a meeting held in Paris on the night of Friday March 12, 1999. By prior arrangement among some of those who attended the meeting from London, it was decided to dump *Hot Spring* and promote the *Tamil Guardian* instead by placing that paper in pliable editorial hands.

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Concerned with the development, some leading members of the Tamil community met and discussed how best *Hot Spring* could be rescued from immediate death. Finding enough funds was the need. It was decided for a start that a fund-raising dinner be arranged. A dinner committee of five styling themselves as 'Friends of Hot spring' was formed; that '*eminence grise'* of the Tamil community, C.J.T.Thamotharam, R.Ganeshalingam, Siva Muttulingaswamy, Dr.Senthil Kumar and Dr. S.Ratneswaran. The dinner held on June 5 turned out to be a glittering function. There was special menu, wine on the table, a bar, raffle of a computer (presented by Ganeshalingam), a musical interlude and a comedy presentation by three elderly ladies. A bound copy of the *Hot Spring* signed by me was auctioned and Miss. Eliza Mann wrote a cheque for £500/- on the spot. Thanks to the excellent arrangments made by Ganeshalingam particularly, and by Dr.Ratneswaran and the rallying round of a host of friends it became an occasion to remember. To me especially, it was an emotional evening with a blaze of attention turned on me by speaker after speaker, Adrian Wijemanne, Nadesan Satyendra, Dr.Pararasan Arulanandam, S.Sivakolunthu (a special attendee from Singapore) and Dr.Senthil Kumar. Ganesh provided another surprise by presenting me on behalf of the Tamil community with an ornamental silver plaque honouring me on my writing skills and my contribution to the Tamil cause. What began as a fund-raising dinner eventually turned out to be a felicitation function in my honour with a lady on one of the tables raising three hearty cheers for me at the end.

It was sometime around this time that LTTE's Anton Balasingham and wife Adele who were in the Vanni arrived in London. I had a call from one-time spokesperson Anton Rajah ('Ramasar') who said Bala would like to meet me. I expressed my pleasure because I had not met him since the time we were neighbours at Besant Nagar, India,in the early eighties. All three called on me at the *Hot Spring* office on July 8. We had a pleasant chat. Adele told me how at one stage Bala who was an insulin-dependent diabetic went through a critical phase in his life. His state of health was causing so much concern and popular grief that Mr.Pirabhakaran thought Bala's only hope

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of survival depended on his being taken to London. It involvolved a daring, risky sea journey but he survived.

With the beginning of August, *Hot Spring* changed hands. It was an unfortunate coincidence that Eelam House managers withdrew support for *Hot Spring* just around the time Balasingham arrived in London and I told him so. He offered no comment. The next few months saw not only the birth of the new millenium but also political assasinations of two outstanding Tamil personalities – Neelan Tiruchelvam and Kumar Ponnambalam. We covered both events exhaustively. Our cover picture of Neelan with President Chandrika and our editorial comment on his assasination evoked much interest in our readers. The most surprising response came from Professor A.J.Wilson in Canada, surprising for more than one reason. Wilson was a friend of Neelan and was politically associated with him during Jayawardene's time. It was a seven page hand written letter which he began writing from his sick bed at Toronto General Hospital and completed from his home and faxed to me, marked ' Private and Personal'. "My dear Siva", the letter began and he said, "A mutual friend of ours was keen to have my views on the special *Hot Spring* issue on our late lamented Neelan." He continued, "Your editorial said a great deal and I think it was appropriate that a widely respected and senior journalist such as you took on the onerous task of undressing the emperor even though he may not have had a stitch of clothing by the time you had cleared the debris. The outside cover picture was a telling illustration of abject genuflection….". Although he mourned the death of his friend, he also had the perspicacity to see my point of view. Sadly though, he passed away the following year.

*Hot Spring's* future again became uncertain as funds got low. It was not that the affluent Tamil expats could not find the money to run a monthly magazine in colour. Two hundred bottles of whiskey a month could have met the cost. May be not all were aware of the financial struggle the journal was going through. May be not enough efforts were made to find the money. Friends who were responsible for the revival of the journal began to exert

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pressure on me to use my personal influence with the community to canvass funds. I could not do that. My editorial inputs into the magazine was all the capital I could offer. My creator, whoever He was, had neither taught me how to earn money nor how to ask for it. March 2000 saw the last issue of *Hot Spring*. There wasn't even time to say Farewell to our readers.

I was getting on to 70 and perhaps it was time to get away from pressures and deadlines. My editing days could be over but it did not mean dropping the pen as well. Professional journalists know that two different skills go to make the profession; editing skill and writing skill. A good editor need not necessarily be a good writer, nor a good writer need possess the skills of a good editor. For a writer there was no question of retirement. You keep on writing until you drop dead, They call it 'dying in harness'.

There comes moments in a writer's life when you feel exhilarated to know that with one piece of writing you have touched the hearts and minds of a host of readers both known and unknown. It happened to me in March 2001. The US ambassador in Colombo Mr.Ashley Wills had gone to Jaffna and made what I thought was a patronising speech. The report said he spoke at some 'Jaffna Public Library' which roused me even more when I thought of the real Jaffna Public Library which was burned down by imported thugs in 1981. I immediately sat down and typed an 'open letter' to the ambassador which was published in three websites. (The full text of the letter was later published also in my book *'The Pen and the Gun'*). I never anticipated the profuse compliments that were to follow in person, through the phone and by e-mail. Looking back at my diary jottings, here are some reactions. *"It came from the heart"* – (Satyendra); *It was a Cassius Clay Knock-out"* – (Kirupa from France); *"A classic"* – (Maharasingam); *"A Masterpiece"* – (Sorna); *"Fantastic"* – (Rajan Namasivayam); *"You have a magic pen"* – (Pon Kulendiren from Canada); *"You are on the world map"* – (Anton Saverimuttu from Canada); Congratulations came from Fr. Emmanuel in Germany, Bartlett Rajasingam from Australia, Deidre McConnell in Manchester and several others. A Christian priest not known to me got my number from someone

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and told me, "I was moved to tears reading your letter". What a variety of reactions! Someone whom I ran into at some meeting even complimented me on my courage, though I could not see any courage was involved in writing an open letter. May be he was frightened of ambassadors! A Canadian Tamil Radio had even relayed my letter in translation, I was told.

But all these apart, there was a little drama that went on elsewhere. A human rights worker in Australia, Murugesu Paramanathan was so taken up reading my letter that he e-mailed it to the US embassy in Colombo. A prompt response had gone from the embassy thanking Mr.Paramanathan and asking him whether he could provide them with my e-mail address. He did not know, so he contacted human rights activist Kiruba in France. Kiruba in turn asked me whether he was free to give my e-mail address to Param. I had no objection. The next thing that followed was a complete surprise. It was a personal communication to me from the ambassador himself. It was very conciliatory in tone, saying how he wished I had agreed more with what he said in his speech. He gave me his personal e-mail address and hoped that I would keep in touch with him. But I didn't. I have had my say and that was that. I was already overwhelmed with the spontaneity and warmth of the reader responses and that was what mattered to a writer. I was also happy with the response from the ambassador himself. It looked as if I had touched his heart as well. To touch the heart of the victim himself is writing triumph enough!

Having one leg in France and the other in the UK was of course a way of eating the cake and having it. The French part of the life was always largely humdrum, living as I was in a basically Tamil milieu, untouched by the French way of life, but once you come past Dover or arrive at Waterloo, life would perk up. It is always a question of language. The hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils who ended up as refugees in European countries such as France, Germany and Switzerland were the post-1983 arrivals, armed with knowledge of no other language than their mother tongue. In course of time they would pick up just enough knowledge of the language of the country

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to enable them to earn a living. But otherwise, they created a small Tamil world of their own, conversing in Tamil, eating Tamil food, seeing Tamil films and continuing the same life they led back home. That is also why the most vociferous support for the Tamil cause came from these Tamils and not from those living in English-speaking countries. Canada was the exception which while English-speaking, became home for no less than half-a-million Tamils.

What of my own sojourns in England? Following the 'Hot Spring dinner', the next happy occasion for me was the publication of my book, *'Sri Lanka: The Pen and the Gun'*. It was a compilation of my selected writings scattered in several newspapers, journals, publications and websites over a period of nearly twenty five years from 1977 to 2001. Seeing the book in print came after a long struggle with the printer. When he brought it out eventually, it was not without blemishes either. But all that was forgotten when the book was launched on a cold January evening at a hall in Kingsbury, London in 2002, amidst friends and an appreciative audience.

Until I reached the hall, I did not realise the trouble that had been taken by my friends in the organising of the function. It was another set of friends this time, a mere handful of them who at very short notice had made arrangements; Engineer Sivarajah, Solicitor Neminathan both activists in the Tamil cause, Padmanabha Iyer, that tireless Tamil 'literary midwife' and of course veteran Varadakumar of the Tamil Information Centre who published the book. The printing expenses of the book were already met by a few of my old friends of the *'Tamil Forum'*

Inaugurating the function with the lighting of the traditional oil flame was that 'war horse' of many a rights campaign Sinnappu Maharasingam. The Tamil invocatory song was rendered by the Eelam Tamils' own incomparable Carnatic vocalist Mrs. Mathini Sriskandarajah. The ever helpful Dr.Ratneswaran acted as master of ceremonies. The Labour M.P. for Brent North, Barry Gardiner chaired the function. Dr.Cyriac Mappryl,

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a research scholar in race relations, while quoting some passages from it, brought an incisive mind into a review of the book. The guest speaker of the evening was the European Member of Parliament Robert Evans. The function couldn't have gone better.

While the book release function left one with the feeling of something accomplished, more heart warming was a tribute that came fom a reputed fellow journalist in Colombo. In an essay titled 'Two tales of a city named Jaffna' editor Ajith Samaranayake wrote in the *Sunday Observer* of 17th March 2002 , (excerpts):

> "The book is more than an anthology of collected writings. Although not an autobiography it offers insights into the writer who on his own admission, had led a fairly tranquil life in journalism, advertising, The Ceylon Tourist Board and finally the Colombo Plan Bureau until he was propelled by a sense of mission following the mounting attacks on the Tamil community and its sense of collective helplessness to assume an interventionist role.
>
> The *Saturday Review* which Sivanayagam edited from Jaffna was unusual in the sense that it was a newspaper sprung from the soil of the Tamil heartland but edited with aplomb in a language which has remained the language of the ruling class in Sri Lanka and the *lingua franca* of the elite irrespective of the homage which is ritually paid to the official language which appear increasingly to be only for the 'hoi polloi'.
>
> In another sense, 'The Pen and the Gun' is the biography of a whole people. There is a sense of elegy in Sivanayagam's description of the Jaffna of days gone by, when in the famous words of the late Maoist leader N.Shanmugathason, the North was regulated by a 'postal order economy'.

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> The boys were studious, the people law-abiding and their ultimate trophy was a good government job. Sivanayagam says that they used to joke in Jaffna that even if you looked after hens that it should be for a government department for there was a respectable salary and pension attached to it. Another joke had it that if you tripped and fell in Jaffna the chances are that you would fall on a school teacher or a pundit!
>
> How then did such a tranquil people take to arms; how did the haven of peace erupt in flames? How did Jaffna spawn one of the most violent movements of terror and how was it able to bring about the near prostration of a country? It is a familiar tale but Sivanayagam tells it in a way which is all his own. He has a superb command of the English language and when necessary he can slip into the vernacular as well.
>
> The book consists basically of the editorials Sivanayagam had written but a solid ideological underpinning is provided by a series of articles tracing Sinhala-Tamil relations, both historically and otherwise, under the title of "The Inevitability of Tamil Eelam". Sivanayagam has often been demonised as the supreme propagandist but that is to make him a cheap demagogue. He is a greater man and a man of a wide humanistic sympathies…."

Reading Sachi Sri Kantha's review of the book in the *Thamil Sangam* website later, I was not surprised to find that he too had been moved by that open letter of mine addressed to U.S. Ambassador Ashley Wills. Quoting a para from that letter, Sachi commented,

> "Every sentence in this open letter to the American ambassador packs punches akin to Muhamad Ali's 'stings' in the ring and readers are left without any doubt that Hon.Ashley Wills, if it was a boxing match could have been floored by knock out, like many of Ali's opponents in the ring…..".



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The book priced at £10/- a copy had a ready demand not only in the U.K. and the west but also in Sri Lanka where Vijitha Yapa bookshop sold all fifty copies that were sent at the Sri Lanka price of Rs. 1499/-. It was a pity I could not meet Yapa's request for more copies.

While the idea of bringing out "The Pen and the Gun" was an afterthought, my mind had been focussed all along in the publication of this very book. The thought germinated while I was at the paying ward of the Madras G.H. under police guard in 1992. I had even thought of the title and the opening chapters. But my subsequent wanderings and my involvement with *Hot Spring* for five years gave me no time to sit at it. Eventually when I did, (with my computer, books, files and reference material, housed in a rented room in Wimbledon) the unforseen happened. My visa to the U.K. was refused.

It was summer 2003. The British government had brought in a change to its visa procedure. Unlike earlier, non-European nationals like this poor writer had to get a prior visa before travel on payment of a non-refundable visa fee. The French government too had been insisting on a prior visa, so it was a reciprocal measure. One could understand that. But what hurt me was that the refusal of the visa meant that having come very near to the completion of this book, I had to abandon it altogether. My mind went back to Ernest Hemingway's 'Old man' who thought that he had landed the biggest fish in his life only to see it ending in mere bones.

The British visa office was down an alley in Paris. It was trying enough having to queue up each morning on the pavement outside, but as it turned out, it proved more vexatious being interviewed by the woman Vice-Consul (or whoever she was) through an aperture on the wall. She said that her grounds for refusing me my visa were: 1.) Being a refugee in France, I had been travelling too frequently to Britain – (true); 2.) That on my own admission I did not know French; 3.)That I owned no property in France!; 4.) That I had a daughter settled in Britain. All that meant – she had reason to believe – that once I reached Britain I would try to stay on. My reminding

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her that for eight long years I had been travelling to Britain on visas without trying to stay on had no effect on her. The French government paid me a monthly old age allowance that went directly to my bank in Paris, money that was quite sufficient for my needs. I was entitled to free medical care as well. Didn't I undergo by-pass surgery there without spending a single franc? Why should I risk losing all these benefits? Her body language showed that she seemed to resent even my speaking the Queen's language fluently! "So what was the option that I was left with?", I asked more to myself than expecting an answer from her. She said the only option I had, she repeated it, was to apply for a 'settlement visa' as a dependent of my daughter. I told her I had no intention of settling in Britain, that I had my wife, my elder daughter and my own property in Sri Lanka and all I needed was a 'visit visa' to complete my book. But her mind was made up.

That was a big blow to me but something else happened to cushion that disappointment. The door to London was closed but a window opened elsewhere that could have changed my direction in life. That came with the arrival of the LTTE team from the Vanni, headed by the political wing leader Thamilselvan. Ilango, the head of the Tamil co-ordinating committee (TCC) office in Paris told me that Thamilselvan was desirous of meeting me. I said that the desire was mutual. I had my own journalist's curiosity about the man. On August 21st, the team arrived. Apart from Thamilselvan, there were Pulithevan, head of the LTTE's 'Peace secretariat' in Kilinochchi; Thamilini, head of the LTTE's 'Women's political wing'; George, Thamilselvan's able English interpreter; young Nediyavan and others. Then there were the distinquished resource persons who had come in an advisory capacity including Shiva Pasupathy - one time Sri Lanka's Attorney General, Professor Ramasamy of the Dept. of Political Science, National University of Malaysia (a contributor to *Hot Spring*), Professor Sornarajah who once contributed a provocative article, "Are Jayawardene and Athulathmudali war criminals?" to the Tamil Information magazine I edited in Madras way back in the eighties and attorney Rudrakumaran from the U.S. whom I had known.



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It was difficult to imagine Thamilselvan with his sunny disposition and Pulithevan full of mirth and jokes as persons who had emerged out of a 20-year war. Both of them were very keen that I should visit the Vanni and work with them. "We will arrange your flight, get down your books and reference material and make your stay there comfortable enough to complete your book", they said. Thamilselvan said in his chaste Tamil, "It is the wish of our leader and the wish of all of us that you come to the Vanni and help us". It surprised me in finding not only how well they were briefed about me but also how knowledgeable they were of the outside world. Thamilini for example wanted to be taken to the Normandy coast. She wanted to re-create in her own mind some of the events of World War II. Two of the girls who accompanied her were interested in seeing the 'Mona Lisa' painting. So it was not a 'jungle' from which they had emerged. They were all good readers obviously. The LTTE team left for Switzerland on August 30th.

Meanwhile there was a new development regarding my British visa question. Friends in London, my daughter and son-in law who were all equally dissappointed at the refusal of my visa were wondering how best to help. One concerned friend who knew a British firm of solicitors who dealt with refugee issues spoke to them on my behalf and passed on their telephone number to me. The woman solicitor at the other end was most helpful. "Did you ask for a written refusal of your visa?", she asked me. I said, "No". " Were you told that you have the option of appealing against the refusal?", she asked me. I said, "No".

When on my subsequent visit, I asked the visa officer for a written refusal, she did not look pleased. She gave it to me with some reluctance. Later, when I took the appeal and handed it over to one of the women at the counters below, even she didn't look pleased. When I asked for an acknowledgment she was evasive. The Vice-Consul would write to me, she said. I asked her what was the proof I had, that I had handed over the appeal? She had no answer. I asked her how long it would take for the appeal to be heard? "May be six months", she said. "Six months!", I said in astonishment. "Minimum



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six months", she said. She wanted to rub it in.

That settled it. There was no point in hanging around in France waiting for the appeal hearing that could even take the better part of an year and with no guarantee that it would go in my favour. It meant taking a hard decision – a final goodbye to England and the abandoning of my book project for the time being. I could get my books, files, documentation, reference material and computer lying orphaned in a rented room at Wimbledon shipped to Sri Lanka. The next step was to go through the process of departure from France. It was not a question of catching the next flight to Colombo from Charles de Gaulle airport. As a refugee governed by the Geneva convention, one has to go through a procedure involving visits to the Refugee office, the Police, paper work in the French language and so on. So I set about it. While I was busy with these arrangments, I also had to fly to Norway at the request of Thamilselvan for a one-to-one meeting with him. It meant four nights away at the Raddisson SAS Hotel in Oslo. Making one's independent plans was what every man does but in my case, I forgot one thing – the unseen hand that has its own way when it comes to my life. In March 2004 I found myself in England. How I got there was another story.

★ ★ ★

On October 7th 2003, I had handed over my appeal at the visa office in Paris. Frustrated by what the woman said about a 'minimum six months' delay, I gave myself a deadline; escape the winter and be in Colombo before December. Back in Colombo I was going to miss my two-year-old grandson Mithiran and that too hurt. On November 9th my daughter Narni and son-in-law Elangco brought Mithiran and we spent two days together in Paris. By the beginning of December, I was yet in France dogged by problems of ill-health, persistent nose bleed, eye strain and hospital appointments. Good that it happened that way or may be it was meant to happen that way because my daughter phoned me on December 10th, giving me some startlingly good news. My appeal has succeeded! The adjudicator's office in London had sent

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her two copies of the order, one to be forwarded to me in France. What did that woman at the visa office talk about - 'minimum six months', when within two months, my appeal had not only been heard but the order itself given? It was then that I realised two truths; 1). There was an inbuilt sense of fairness in the way the British visa system operates – the adjudicator is someone appointed by the government but yet functions independent of the Home Office. Once the order was given, the decision becomes final but there was also provision for the visa authorities to appeal against the adjudicator's finding within one month of the order. But I was told it never happens, because it could result in further loss of face. 2.) The second truth I realised was the kind of games that they play at the visa office in Paris. Firstly, the woman visa officer should have had the same sense of fairness of her government and told me I had the option of an appeal. She didn't – not because of forgetfulness or lapse of memory. Secondly, when I met her subsequently in the company of my son-in-law and asked for a written refusal of my visa, she was a little put out. She didn't expect it. She thought I had come to discuss about the settlement visa. She avoided looking at me and came out with a whopping lie to my son-in-law. "I did not refuse him the visa", she said "I only asked him to withdraw his visa application and instead apply for a settlement visa!" It was clearly unworthy of the office she held. Thirdly, those clumsy attempts to discourage me from pursuing my appeal, with the talk of six months delays, were obviously part of a wider conspiracy among the staff.

Winning the appeal was one thing but getting the visa was another. On my personal enquiry at the visa office on February 5th 2004, I was told that their copy of the adjudicator's order had not been received. The two letters that I sent to the visa clearance manager had no response. My son-in-law's e-mail enquiry to the visa people in Paris evoked the reply that the relevant documents had not arrived. My daughter shot off an angry letter to the Home Office with no results. It was becoming clear that despite my appeal succeding, someone somewhere was determined to block my entry into Britain. For the second time in five months, I decided to leave for Sri Lanka. On March 9th 2004 I went to the refugee office and sought clearance

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to leave the country.

Two days later, on 11th something happened which was nothing short of a mystery. I had a call from Mr.N.Seevaratnam in London. Mr.Seevaratnam was an old friend and a veteran in the Tamil cause. He was the founder and main trustee of the Muththumari Amman temple in Tooting. What he told me amazed me. "Take your passport and go to the visa office", he said. He was not the kind of person to make jokes. To my puzzled enquiry this was what he said. "A lady from the visa office in Paris telephoned him and asked whether he knew a Mr.Subramaniam Sivanayagam. On his affirming, she had said she was unable to contact me on the phone and would he kindly pass on the message asking him to call at the visa office with his travel document." I asked him whether it could be a leg-pull on the part of someone? He did not share my sense of puzzlement at all. He had assumed that I had given his number to the visa office. That, I said was the mysterious part. I had no reason or occasion to give his telephone number to anyone in the visa office. So, how did they get hold of his number? Anyway, what was the sense of urgency that prompted that lady to adopt this devious method of contacting me? If she could not get me on the phone, a letter to my address could have reached me the following day. I don't like mysteries; in fiction – yes, but not in real life. But Mr.Seevaratnam was a pratical man. "Why not go to the visa office", he said, "and test it for yourself whether the call was genuine or bogus".

The reception I got at the visa office was very warm. When I placed the travel document at the counter and said I had come for the visa, the woman said, "Thank you Mr.Sivanayagam. Will you kindly call at 4pm. Your visa will be ready at that time." It was a six month visa with multiple entry.

By now I should have got used to these twists and turns in my life, the ups and downs, the 'snakes and ladders' but somehow it always surprises me when they happen. The satisfaction of finding myself back in England was partly robbed by my falling victim to cancer. With illness slowing me

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down, the inspiration to write was also drying up. Well, I have come to the end of this last chapter of the book but the introduction has yet to be written. An index has to be prepared. A printer has to be found. How long will the immigration authorities permit me to remain here? It is pointless worrying myself or planning. What good has it brought me?

How many readers would have heard that old popular melody –

*"Que Sera Sera. What will be, will be".*

❑ ❑ ❑

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Subramaniam Sivanayagam, born in Jaffna, Ceylon, in 1930 during British colonial rule, had his secondary education at Kokuvil Hindu College and Jaffna College, Vaddukoddai. In Colombo, he had worked on the editorial staff of the *Ceylon Daily News* and the *Ceylon Daily Mirror*. He also worked as English-language Copy Writer at J.Walter Thompsons and later as Editor (Publications) at the Ceylon Tourist Board. He was founder-editor of the *Saturday Review*, Jaffna, which was banned by the Sri Lankan government of that time. Moving to Madras (now Chennai) he headed the Tamil Information Centre and later edited the fortnightly *Tamil Nation*. Ending up as a political refugee in France, he became founder-editor of the monthly journal, *Hot Spring* published from Paris and subsequently from London.

Mr.Sivanayagam is the author of the book – *The Pen and the Gun*, a compilation of his political writings over a period of twenty years. The book was launched in London in January 2000.

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