

ELLALAN FORCE AND THE SUBVERSION OF THE TAMIL CONSCIENCE

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Just before the festivities of the Sinhala and Tamil New Year got under way, a different kind of activity shook Colombo. In place of the usually annoying but much less dangerous fire crackers, four real bombs exploded in the vicinity of four city hotels. No one thought of the JVP since they are supposed to be out of the terror equation. According to government press releases the bad guys apparently were the LTTE. The insurgent group has since denied any involvement in the bombings, but most folks I have met do not seem to believe the LTTE. Figuring out who is actually responsible is the vocation of "intelligence" services and Colombo's well established political pundits, and is certainly beyond the grasp and the oracular abilities of the average anthropologist. What is clear however, is that something unpleasant and potentially dangerous did happen, and may continue to happen. For what it may be worth, a number of factors seem to be clear in the explosions and some other incidents that took place immediate afterwards:

1) The operation was quite sloppy by usual LTTE standards. The explosions caused relatively little structural damage, even though they did cause some severe injuries to some of the bombers. One of them, who was set on fire as a result of a premature explosion, jumped into the ocean near the Galkissa tourist resort. NO one had located the infamous cyanide capsule.

2) Soon after the explosions some people received a bilingual (Tamil and English) warning by mail. A group called itself the Ellalam Force claimed responsibility for the hotel bombings and a blast in a bus in Medavachchiya in January 1994. The letters warned people (foreigners) to keep away from tourist hotels and commercial investments because funds generated through such ventures were claimed to be used for killing "innocent Tamils".

3) The English text of the warning letters seem to be direct translations of the Tamil versions, and were appalling in terms of both spelling and grammar. Mind you, this is not the usual outrage of the post independent English-educated middle class individual appalled at the miss-use of queen's English. After all one should not necessarily expect your average city terrorist to be fluent in English and talk with an Oxbridge accent. But the sloppy Anglo does have a point. The LTTE's English new bulletins usually read much better, and their spelling is certainly better than mine. For example, just browse through the pages of LTTE's *Hot Spring*. On the other hand the LTTE may have used some of the dumbest of its Baby Brigade for this operation.

Two other points in the warning letters deserve attention. the name the gang of bombers have given themselves, and the word the bombers use to refer to the Sinhala. They call themselves the Ellalan Force. Ellalan in sinhala is Elara, and the Sinhala are referred to as "Thuttakemunu" or Dutugemunu. It is here that the contradictions of the mythology involved becomes apparent. The use or abuse of Elara and Dutugemunu images in the discourses and rhetoric of Sinhala nationalism have been amply demonstrated by many social scientists over the past decade or so.

Anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere in a paper some years ago talked about the dismatling of the troubled conscience of Dutugemunu, and by extension the conscience of the Sinhala people. According to myth and popular lore after his military victory over Elara, Dutugemunu was overcome with grief over the killing of thousands of people in war. What Obeyesekere was attempting to illustrate was the subversion of that conscience or the memory of it from the popular conscience of the Sinhala. In that process another integral component of the whole Elara - Dutugemunu myth cluster has also been dismantled. For instance, the popularly held beliefs regarding Elara's sense of justice and fair play, and the manner in which Dutugemunu himself entombed Elara after his cremation and decreed worship of his tomb. Clearly, if the image of Dutugemunu is used, or miss-used as a symbol of anti-Tamil militancy the components of the myth outlined above would become problematic, particularly in the context of the on going war fought between Sinhala and Tamil youth.

And now with the bombing of the hotels in Colombo there seems to be an attempted subversion of the Tamil conscience. Alternatively, the folks who set up the explosives and sometimes mistakenly blew themselves up as well, are unaware of their own heritage. Elara, a king of South Indian origin, has for long been appropriated as the private property of Sri Lankan Tamils. But in most cases (as far as I know) his image was that of a just king, and sometimes as a king who fought off what was perceived as Sinhala aggression. The latter interpretation was of course the work of Tamil nationalists interested in countering Sinhala myth making.

But the bomber boys seems to have completely transformed the main trends in the Elara myth in the most polemical fashion. Elara is not the ideal symbol for a group of people who go around blowing up hotels, and sometimes themselves, and threatening to kill innocent people simply because they do like the politics of the state. After all, Elara or Ellalan is supposed to have offered to repair the damages he had inadvertently caused to a Buddhist temple, executed his own son because he had killed a calf accidentally, and regularly offered alms to the Buddhist clergy in Anuradhapura.

Surely, Elara, indiscriminate bombings and threats to kill civilians and destroy property simply do not make sense. I would think the name of other rulers of South Indian origin who have been appropriated by some Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists (and considered Tamil by many Sinhalese themselves) would have served the bombers' purposes better. For instance what about Kalinga Maga or Arya Chakravarti? Why not Prabhakaran himself?

Killing people and destroying property is bad enough. But doing so in the name of a person who, at least in myth did not approve of such violence is worse. In a sense this episode is symptomatic of the naive and irrational proportions the current inter-ethnic conflict has reached.

FARMER SUICIDES AND THE CRISIS IN DRY ZONE AGRICULTURE

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During the past few months, 15 cultivators in the Polonnaruwa district have committed suicide, by swallowing insecticide. The question of agricultural loans given by banks has come to the forefront of public attention after the press highlighted the circumstances under which these suicides have taken place. We recently visited Polonnaruwa on a fact finding mission; our aim was to try to identify relevant issues, study their genesis and insert our analysis into the on-going public discussion. During our two-day visit we met and held discussions with the family members of six farmers who had taken their lives, two young farmers who had attempted to commit suicide, a number of other cultivators as well as some bank and government officials, private money lenders, traders and peasant activists.

We present our observations in the context of the crisis we see developing in peasant colonization schemes.

Rural Indebtedness

The debate in Colombo primarily revolves round the question whether drastic attempts by state banks to recover loans have led to suicide action by a negligible segment of those cultivators who have defaulted on loans. This is an incorrect and irrelevant question. The real issue concerns the serious indebtedness of many farmers to both banks and private money lenders.

Particularly in Dry Zone agriculture, peasant production has become capital intensive although under-capitalization is still a characteristic of paddy production. Indeed, the transformation of the rural economy in the direction of capital intensive and market as well as export-oriented agriculture has been a major goal of agricultural policy in recent times. According to current estimates, a minimum investment of about Rs. 35,000/= is needed to cultivate a 3 acre-plot in the Colonization Schemes; farmers have no option but to obtain credit from a variety of sources to cover this cost.

Although there are loan schemes that make bank loans theoretically available, many farmers are not eligible to obtain bank credit due to prior defaulting. Recently, banks have initiated a program of re-

scheduling agricultural loans, whereby loans and interests could be repaid in easier installments; however, to the surprise of bank officials and policy makers, many farmers have not made use of this facility. In fact, banks have started legal proceedings to recover outstanding loans.

As we have observed, there is nothing particularly surprising in the failure of cultivators to settle their bank loans by making use of this re-scheduling facility. To begin with, banks are not the only source of credit that farmers make use of. If a farmer becomes ineligible to obtain bank loans, he has no other option but to turn to private money lenders whose interest rates are as high as 20% a month.

The usual practice in private credit transactions is for the farmer to mortgage his future harvest. In other words, loan and the interest would be paid in paddy at the time of the harvest. For a season, the interest rate would be around 120%. Once the harvesting is over, the first thing the farmer has to do is to dispose of a sizeable share of his paddy crop as loan and interest payment. Shop keepers and suppliers of inputs are also there to take their own share of the paddy crop, in order to recover the value of goods they have given on credit. Usually, consumption and input credit too involves an interest of 10% a month. A number of farmers told us that after all these loans and credit are settled, the producer is left with only a few bushels of paddy to take home.

The final share of the harvest to which the actual producer is thus entitled is hardly sufficient for the family's consumption for the next six months. Some of it would invariably be sold in the market to meet family emergencies. Once that stock of paddy is over, the farmer's family is compelled to obtain new loans, or to mortgage jewellery, furniture, bicycles and even agricultural implements.

The survival of the farmer's family would be rendered precarious if the paddy crop of just one season failed, as it happened due to continuous rain during the last *Maha* season in the Polonnaruwa district. The fifteen farmers who committed suicide of course sought an extreme answer to the problem. If the coming *Yala* crop were also to fail, many more farmers might find that extreme