

# Pravāda

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*Pravada* in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

## A DHARMA YUDDHA?

The North-East war, which has so far succeeded in producing a remarkable dynamic for its own reproduction, has once again returned to haunt every aspect of our day to day life. The suddenness of the outbreak of this round of war reminds us of the breakdown of hostilities between the government and the LTTE in June 1990. On both occasions, talks between the two sides were suddenly halted on a unilateral decision made by the LTTE; the ferocity of the LTTE's offensive actions on both occasions was equally astounding. The arena of hostilities is also the same; hostilities have now again erupted in the Eastern province. It is here that people are living most dangerously and it is here that the war for territorial hegemony will be fought out.

Although some Colombo-based newspapers have attempted to label this phase of war 'Eelam War III,' the appellation has not stuck and the reasons for this are quite strange. Actually, there is some strangeness in all the episodes of the post-April 19 war, in so far as its genesis and progress are not easily amenable to logical explanation. As far as the LTTE is concerned, there is no easily discernible purpose in their decision to inaugurate this war. It is obvious that they wanted war back as a factor in the politics of the North-East, but for what immediate objective? Were they trying to obtain by war, goals which they could not achieve by talking peace? If so, has the war so far enabled them to achieve anything tangible, concrete and new? No clear answer to this question is yet visible.

The resumption of hostilities by the LTTE in June 1990, during President Premadasa's tenure, provides a contrasting and classic example of the LTTE's strategic calculations. The two sides pretended to be talking peace, within the

context of a ceasefire, to achieve a single and reciprocal objective, that is to get rid of the Indian peace keeping forces. Once that objective had been achieved by March 1990, the LTTE found no compelling reason to keep their guns silent any longer. They also found it possible at that stage to achieve a measure of territorial control in the Eastern province, establishing themselves in district after district as the IPKF withdrew. However, in 1995, there was no such mutuality of strategic interest binding the two parties - the PA government and the LTTE. Peace was one of the immediate political promises of the government and it was committed to its achievement. The LTTE too declared that it wanted peace; in its public pronouncements and propaganda, the LTTE was actually trying to convince the world that they were more for peace than even the government. However, the reasons they have given to explain their decision to withdraw from negotiations are so clearly untenable that they only serve to support the argument that their concept of peace is primarily contained within a military and militaristic one.

This is the backdrop to the PA government's response to the LTTE after April 19th. The key word here appears to be 'military response' rather than 'military option.' 'Defensive war,' 'limited war,' 'war for peace' are some of the other formulations that have come up in the articulation of the government's handling of the LTTE after April 19. The central premise here is that the government's military response to the LTTE's act of aggression is morally justified and is consonant with the political necessity of bringing the Tigers back to the negotiation table. Ironically, the LTTE by its provocative military action in April has provided the Sri Lankan state a non-chauvinistic ideological argument for the pursuit of war in the North-East.

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That should, however, not be the end of the war story. There is no fundamental reason for this so-called 'defensive war for peace' to be any different from the previous phases of the conflict. Actually, the PA government's war too has its own dynamics which are capable of totally obliterating the righteous and moral status which the government presently appears to enjoy. There are worse case politico-military scenarios awaiting the PA government; the government therefore should be unwaveringly prudent not fall into the trap of the rhetoric of 'military parity' or 'military victory'.

Perhaps the worst thing that could happen in the present crisis, as far as the PA government is concerned, is the escalation of the present military engagement with the LTTE into a major offensive attack in the Jaffna peninsula. At one level, the LTTE, which is presently engaging the government forces in a war of attrition, may force the state to launch a large scale battle in the North. At another level, on the basis of certain strategic calculations, state military strategists may feel that the 'clearing up of Jaffna' would

be both necessary and feasible. Whatever the circumstances, a battle for Jaffna is most likely to change qualitatively the present phase of the crisis. The question is not whether the Sri Lankan state under Chandrika Kumaratunga can crush the LTTE militarily, but the unmitigated catastrophe which the further intensification of the conflict could certainly entail.

A general offensive in Jaffna will certainly result in military and political disaster. Death in large numbers of soldiers as well as civilians and the mass destruction of civilian property would be the immediate consequences of such an offensive; this is only to be expected in a situation where the LTTE has been making preparations for months to 'welcome' the armed forces of the state into their territory. Resorting to their familiar and well-tested strategies on their own terrain, the LTTE is very likely to let the army be sucked into a situation where Tamil civilians in Jaffna, and not necessarily their fighters, are the immediate and most visible victims of the offensive. Even assuming that the army may succeed in capturing territory in the first wave of the offensive, retaining and controlling the land and society thus captured would be an enormous task for the government. One cardinal lesson which the government should learn from the experience of the IPKF is that the control of a militarily captured territory would inevitably result in human rights violations of massive proportions. If one seizes a society by means of violence, however altruistic one's intentions may be, keeping that society under one's writ would require violence and more violence.

We are not experts in military matters; we are only concerned to point out the political implications of certain kinds of military action. To put the argument more bluntly, what prudent political goal is there for the government to achieve through the extension of the war to Jaffna, either by design or in response to the LTTE's provocations? Our answer is: nothing tangible. If the conflict intensifies, as suggested in our worse case scenario, the government will certainly run the risk of alienating the Tamil people and the international community. When the war begins to play havoc on the civilian population in Jaffna, the goodwill of the international community which the government presently enjoys, is likely

to be its first casualty. Actually, the government should not take international goodwill for granted. This goodwill is conditional to the government's commitment to a negotiated settlement and to the due observance of human rights. It should also be remembered that the LTTE is very busy refurbishing its international image. The expatriate Tamil community, with its image of a citizenry discriminated into exile, plays a large part in this exercise.

If the regime were to be isolated from the Tamil people and the international community, its ability to address seriously Sri Lanka's ethnic problem will be severely damaged.

If the PA government wants to wage a Dharma Yuddha (a morally justified war) against the LTTE, it should begin work on the political front without delay, by taking fresh and bold initiatives. The best option available to the government is to offer the Tamil people a comprehensive political settlement based on the principle of regional autonomy. The term 'political package' has now become more or less a mystical mantra (it is supposed to be there, but not yet 'unveiled' to human eyes); yet the hope of a political settlement still remains strong among all people and they await the unveiling of the package with much hope.

This implies that a political initiative towards 'unveiling the package', thereby giving an assurance to the Tamil people that their claims to regional autonomy will be accepted irrespective of the outcome of the war with the LTTE, should not be made conditional to any improvement in the military ground situation. It is indeed such a political initiative that can also tilt the military balance in the government's favour and not the other way round. Any further delay in announcing the terms of a political settlement will result in disappointment among the people looking towards peace and, very dangerously, in creating opportunities for the re-emergence of those diverse retrograde tendencies that cluster round notions of a hegemonic Sinhala society in Sri Lanka. These voices were silent during the last six months but are now signalling a return that might push the country back into the 1980s.

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