

PEACE: UNDERSTANDING OUR REALITY!

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Peace is something that most of us earnestly desire, and none more so than the ordinary people of this country, who one way or the other, have suffered the most from its lack. Yet the path is perilous; the cost of wrong conceptualisation, shoddy groundwork and wrong decisions are most tragic for those who have the least ability to influence decisions. It is this aspect of the matter which causes the greatest concern.

Do the government, its negotiators and peace activists possess an adequate understanding of the problem and its ramifications? Presentations on the subject in the South have mainly dealt with its legal, economic and constitutional aspects, and not least the impact on foreign relations, in particular the role of India. Several of these have been very enlightened and have questioned the constricting role of Sinhalese nationalist ideology and of the disastrous politics based on it. Yet these have generally not gone to the heart of the matter, which if we do, raises several awkward moral questions. This is the difference between talking about our own conflict and that in say Afghanistan. The former brings into question our own sense of responsibility as well as challenging our record of action and inaction over the past twenty years and more.

If these moral questions are not discussed, we will fail to understand the very deep-seated alienation of the Tamil community and the frightening repressive machinery that has been erected within this community, supposedly as the only means of resisting state oppression. The failure to understand one would also mean an inability to understand the other, except to be awed from time to time by its destructive potential.

Take these matters: the well-attested removal by the forces of hundreds of Tamil civilians from refugee camps in the East who then disappeared; the bombing and shelling of civilian areas in the North with no evident rational purpose, leaving the civilians to believe that they were the intended victims; the Welikade prison massacre of July 1983. These cannot be put aside as spur-of-the-moment reflex actions; they stemmed from consciously articulated state policy. Without going into a catalogue of alleged discrimination, we pose one question: As regards state policy, what does the Mahaveli Authority's 'Weli Oya' settlement signify, not just taking into account the Tamil inhabitants driven away, but also the not less hapless Sinhalese civilians settled there to lead a grim existence?

Until recently, there has been very little public discussion about these matters in the South. If raised at all, it was mostly buried away as collateral effects of conflict. The human aspect of this violence, how it has scarred a people to the point of legitimizing a growth such as the LTTE, is seldom faced up to.

Here we have a hint of why a refusal to face up to the human tragedy of the former leaves us unable to understand the LTTE.

Several consequences flow from trying to place the LTTE's war in the framework of conventional guerilla warfare and discussing its conduct and strategies in terms of categories articulated in the considerable body of literature devoted to such conflicts.

We take some observations from Prof. R. A. Ariyaratne's recent article 'Reflections on the PA governments's Peace initiative' (*Sunday Island*, 12th & 19th February 1995).

On the LTTE's approach to negotiating with the new PA government: "After all the ultimate insult that can be hurled at a militant liberation movement is that it is selling its struggle for a plate of porridge. Nevertheless for two reasons they could turn a complete blind eye on the knocking on the first door...Alternatively, an innocuous reciprocal gesture entailing neither a substantial reduction of its writ in the North and East nor loss of face in the political reckoning was bound to placate the would-be critics."

On the third of the options open to the LTTE during the last quarter of 1994: "To carry out devastatingly effective forays into selective government targets with a view to dictate terms to a demoralised government from a position of superior strength at the negotiating table".

When not winning, the government loses, as General Wallace Njutting has aptly put it, a guerrilla militia against whom it is pitted wins when not losing.

Dr. Ariyaratne does recognize the LTTE's obduracy even in the face of international opinion and goes on to argue for confidence building measures among the minorities, a material alleviation of their sufferings, and observes: "When what the Tamil community perceive to be the 'external oppressor' is distanced, a movement born out of the disenchantment with the Sinhalese dominated governments's failure to accommodate their aspirations will not hesitate to challenge the Leviathan in their midst".

While agreeing with these comments, we shall attempt to complement the article by going into certain aspects pertaining to the Tamils which we believe to be at the heart of the problem.

From what we could gather, assessments of the problem commonly held by people in decision making circles, negotiators and the peace lobby could be dangerously complacent. The jarring facts are skirted. The LTTE is treated as a classic

rebel group wanting maximum advantage at negotiations, but eventually willing to compromise like most rebel groups. After all, guerilla leaders are supposed to mellow and to want to settle down once they are about 40! Did not Prabhakaran reach 40 last year? Are not LTTE leaders sending their offspring to leading Mission schools? Surely, they are administering Jaffna very well and would like the opportunity to administer it better once sufficient progress has been made in the peace process to start sending in the resources for reconstruction. Can the LTTE after all go on resisting international opinion?

Indeed, there were very similar expectations in 1987 and 1990 but things went tragically wrong. Securing peace therefore demands greater attention to the internal complexities of the problem.

Some grim realities

The 15th November 1994 issue of *Ulakath Thamilar* published by the World Tamil Movement in Toronto reproduced the speech made by LTTE leader Prabhakaran on 'Great Heroes Day', 27th November 1989, undoubtedly on centrally directed instructions. It said:

Moreover, where Prabhakaran is concerned, Prabhakaran is not an individual. He is the representative of a nation. Should Prabhakaran become a traitor to Tamil Eelam, as did Amirthalingam earlier, He too would deserve to be shot dead. Therefore as we celebrate Great Heroes Day, traitors should also be extirpated from the midst of the people

The special issue of the journal was ostensibly meant to glorify young men and women, often children, whose lives were sacrificed for the LTTE's cause. The editorial stated:

Upon the 27th day of November a youngster [Lt. Shankar, the first martyr] closed his eyelids after uttering the words: "We will not see the dawn [that will see an end to the sufferings of the Tamils] unless we spill our blood and pay the price with our life.

Here birth and death have become the raw materials of freedom. On this day martyrs by their thousands await in their tombs with eyelids closed to see their dream of a free Tamil Eelam come true, and to watch the flag of their nation, hoisted by their Leader, fluttering in the breeze.

Such stirring stuff sits among strange companions - other items in the journal add up to a horrifying and vulgar reality exemplifying the hypocrisy and cynicism in the whole business.

There is a full page advertisement by CASH EXPRESS of Toronto saluting the martyrs of Eelam; other advertisements cater to the demands of a consumer society: 'Vijaya's Silk' of Mississauga invites young maidens to their 'enchanted silk dresses, the latest in fashion'; priests, a disciple of Sai Baba and match-making bureaus proffer their services, along with

estate agents, grocers, movers, driving instructors and immigration lawyers; birthday greetings for Canadian born Tamil children inserted by relatives, calling for divine blessings so that these children may grow, 'acquire proficiency in all skills and enjoy a long and prosperous life'. To offer themselves as martyrs would be the last thought in the minds of these consumers.

Against this, what lies behind the salutation to 'martyrs' whose reality is so far removed from Cash Express & Vijaya's Silk and whose life is anything but long and prosperous? They are youngsters cornered by their environment, the violence of the state and by the calculations and propaganda of the LTTE. Methods of recruiting children are most obnoxious. All freedom to articulate alternative political ideas and alternative notions of struggle other than the suicide of a whole people has been stifled. The current recruitment drive in the East is not through political meetings and publications as in the early phase of the struggle where several groups put forward their alternatives and questions could be raised. It is through videos and pictures of heroic LTTE action and the aftermath of atrocities by the forces shown to young children and thus rousing their emotions. Those giving their momentary consent are quickly carried away. These are done under conditions where, even during negotiations for peace, elders in Eastern villages cannot ask questions about the purpose of this exercise.

There are of course no videos about children recruited in the past who had become complete wrecks after being sent into villages to massacre Muslims and Sinhalese, including women and children; or of children with limbs blown and traumatised after being used in wasteful sledgehammer tactics in attempts to breach the defences of Sri Lankan army camps. Why political options were repeatedly spurned and preference given to massive physical and mental death are questions almost never asked.

What we are witnessing is in effect the very elaborate ritual of a religion requiring child-sacrifice. The sacrificial victims are the children of the Tamil poor in the North-East, carried away after being administered narcotics in the form of action videos, while their elders have no choice but to watch in silence.

Around this ritual, the life of an atomised, consumerised Tamil society flows on, buying, selling, marrying, transferring cash, going abroad, crossing borders and so on. How did a society which once attracted considerable youthful idealism in the cause of Tamil liberation collapse into a state of vulgar barbarity, leave alone insensitivity, towards their own fellows?

Paralysis of the Tamil community

What has been sketched above is just one particular aspect of what is happening to Tamils today. Even if it were only a tendency, in any healthy community groups and individuals would have come forward to raise questions. But this is more than just a tendency; it has become an institution, set amidst a total paralysis of public opinion. One could

understand powerless ordinary people living under terror not wanting to see the unpleasant side of things. But what about the intelligentsia? Of course they know quite a bit, and many of them are familiar with the nuances of LTTE literature. Some of them have taken a conscious decision to back the LTTE; others see their personal career aims and security as being for the good of the community. From the BBC Tamil Service to Tamil journals published in this country, there is an evident bias towards promoting the assumptions of a decadent Tamil nationalism. Almost no alternative opinion gets through. There is nothing to question the dangerous path along which the LTTE is driving the Tamils. Religious leaders and other Tamil intellectuals echo the LTTE in demanding the 'fundamental rights' of Tamils before political talks, but say nothing about the fundamental rights of Tamil children inveigled into carrying arms, or of children prevented from joining their parents in the South only because all children are regarded as potential recruits.

Initially, silence was imposed through selective assassination and mass imprisonment. From mid- 1986, there has been a steady exodus of disillusioned Tamils, many of whom lapsed into silence abroad. Any active protest abroad declined sharply after the murder in Paris of Sabalingam. The LTTE had crossed a new threshold and had proved to itself that it could do this kind of thing in the West with impunity. Peace or no peace, the LTTE's arm continues to work in the West with mechanical precision against its critics and opponents.

The institutionalisation of the LTTE within Tamil society was greatly facilitated by the exodus to the West particularly from the Jaffna peninsula. Originally the center of the struggle, 20 to 30% of its population has now migrated to the West. With more than 80, 000 in Toronto alone, they command political influence as well as substantial government patronage. Their feelings are a mixture of guilt and material fears. Among the latter is that of being deported back home in the event of peace; the sum of around rupees 10 lakhs spent on going to the West would then be a waste. Few of them would like to put it in these terms, but peace at home does hold its horrors for them. The LTTE has used all this with great skill. By destroying other groups or branding them traitors, together with a generous spread of action videos and propaganda material, it has projected itself as the only saviour of Tamils at home; it has provided them with the exhilarating prospect of vicariously participating in images of Tamil valour, martial glory and suicidal determination, far from their drab world of material aspirations, thus compensating for their alienation. For a modest contribution, these expatriates enable captive children back home to throw away their lives and expiate the devotion with which they cling to their own.

The South and the Sinhalese are systematically portrayed as enemies and oppressors with whom co-existence is inconceivable. The benign and healthy changes in the South are almost totally blacked out. Eelam, it is maintained, is the only admissible goal from which the LTTE will never swerve.

While the support for the LTTE by emigres from Jaffna is largely passive and in the way of contributions, the principal role in actively promoting the LTTE cause abroad is played by

articulate, highly educated and well connected Tamil emigres from Colombo. Their role is even less pardonable. They had seldom if ever been to Jaffna, and have no idea of how people live and die in the rural parts of the North-East. To them the LTTE's cause is a game as impersonal as it is exciting.

By enforcing a near monopoly over opinion through a combination of influential elite supporters and the use of terror at other levels, uneasy consciences were stilled. In celebrating Great Heroes day, the LTTE has ensured that there was something in it for nearly everyone.

Moreover, like the LTTE leadership, the bulk of the expatriates are from Jaffna. Those left in the peninsula are often financially dependent on relatives abroad. It is also well known that young men 16 and above are in general cynical about the LTTE cause and a large proportion of them have connections who could help them to emigrate to the West. Many of them including a large section of those in the University would openly admit that this is what they aim to do. All these considerations go to determine the nexus between Jaffna society and the LTTE. It also largely determines the social class and age of the recruits and why recruitment in the East is so crucial for the LTTE. The key to the struggle today is the unquestioning material and moral support of the Jaffna expatriate community, the public relations of elite emigres often from Colombo, a global underworld network manned by intimates of the leadership from Jaffna involved in lucrative and controversial shipping operations & the smuggling of narcotics, and the disposable manpower culled mainly from the Rural North, East and the underclass in Jaffna.

The Tamil middle-class in the South

An important and complementary role in legitimising the LTTE is played by the urban Tamil middle class in the South with their influential connections. Their attitudes, though explicable by their experience of communal violence, are nevertheless largely irresponsible. A common sentiment coming from members of this group is that they can now hold their heads high and live in safety in the South because of the LTTE. They are totally insensitive to the killing of thousands of Tamil civilians in the East after June 1990 as a direct result of LTTE tactics, whom moreover the LTTE did nothing to protect. Indeed, life in the North-East remains so insecure to this day that those with the means try to get their children over to Colombo. Was all this death, loss and insecurity in the North-East, including the death of the young LTTE cadres and suicide operatives, just to ensure the safety and dignity of Tamils living in the South? Indeed among the aims of the LTTE was to create insecurity for Tamils in the South so as to secure legitimacy for its notion of Eelam. If Tamils have remained unharmed in the South through all the bomb explosions and assassinations, it is not merely because of fear among the Sinhalese. There are articulate sections advocating a harsh, unrestrained approach to the Tamil problem and Tamil security in the South remains tenuous. The reasons for Tamil security lie far from the LTTE and not least, the fact that a large number of Sinhalese advocate restraint, making

an open reappraisal of the past. It was the regimes in power with their omissions and commissions, rather than the people, who perpetuated the legacy of communal violence.

Hence different segments of Tamil society through their nationalist perceptions see and identify certain aspects of the LTTE as representing their interest. But they are not prepared to see the LTTE's politics with its dynamism in toto and thus identify its destructive core. For certain sections there is no need for that exercise as they could opt out when convenient. On the other hand, for the rural poor and the children who are living in the North-East, the whole affair is a deadly snare.

Behind the LTTE's actions

The LTTE's history has inextricably ensnared it in an ideology that runs counter to ordinary human aspirations. In negotiating all the contradictions it has spawned, any semblance of idealism had been lost; the organisation has become cynical about everyone, from its expatriate supporters to even its own cadre. This history with its huge questionable losses to the community makes increasingly difficult for the leadership to change even if it wishes to.

There are those who see a likeness between the LTTE and the ANC or the PLO and expect that peace is a matter of compromise, patience, effort and dangling the right carrots; they must look at certain other aspects. There were several organisations involved in the South African and Palestinian struggles. Moreover, the ANC and PLO were broad based organisations which were also in conflict with others in aims and strategies. The space which was not totally closed allowed them to be sensitive to realities. This also enabled them to compromise as well as to be creative in handling realities. There was always a real possibility that things could go wrong for them. But they never raised their own movement to a sacred status, call all others traitors and go on to annihilate them during the struggle.

The LTTE, through internal terror as well its narrow nationalist rhetoric coupled to a militaristic approach, has institutionalised a culture of hatred and death to the extent that it is unable to come out of its suicidal path. A unique brand of personal loyalty to the leader and to the movement imposed through an oath together with continuous brain washing is the hallmark of the LTTE.

This analysis also exposes the myth that the interests of the LTTE are also largely the interests of Tamils. The interpretation of the LTTE's devastating (for friend and foe alike) actions as a wish to negotiate from a position of strength also needs to be drastically qualified. What strength has this history and such tactics brought to the Tamils? Is it the progressive intellectual, material, moral and numerical decline of the North-East, much of it self inflicted, or the ability to create conditions where a large number of youth see no brighter prospect on the horizon than that of becoming suicide bombs?

In negotiating all these contradictions, the LTTE's messages are selectively modulated with different things meant for different people. Truth can never be permitted to become a virtue. Those who try to analyse the LTTE's statements issued in English or the much circulated interviews broadcast over the BBC Tamil Service are likely to get it all wrong. On the other hand what comes out in the Tamil publications are fairly explicit such as in 'Ulakath Thamilar' quoted above. Moreover almost every 18 year old from Jaffna or the ordinary man in the street when questioned by those whom they trust would readily admit that the 'people are eager for peace, but peace would not come! Yet few in the peace lobby or in decision making circles take them seriously.

Take the deadlock over the LTTE's demand that Pooneryn army camp be removed and not allowing civilians to travel through Pooneryn and Elephant Pass as long as the army is camped in these places. The issue has little to do with civilian interests, and if a negotiated solution is the desired result, it is hardly the thing over which to hold up talks on a political settlement.

From the experience of the recent past, whether the aftermath of Indo-Sri Lanka accord or during peace talks with the Premadasa regime, the LTTE has shown a callous disregard for civilian interests. In that context removing a camp as a condition for talks will be looked at by the Sinhalese populace at large and by the Army with suspicion, which is understandable. The army has its experience of what the LTTE did in June 1990 after the government obligingly dismantled some army camps. On the other hand ordinary Tamil people are having doubts about the sincerity and the ability of the Southern polity to evolve a political solution. This is due to their experience with post independence politics. Their interest lies in getting a political solution and utilising all the goodwill and openings in the South to achieve just and fair solution. Hence it is urgent that the LTTE starts on negotiating a political solution.

The LTTE's cause may be unattainable and utterly destructive, and perhaps it sees no room for manoeuvre for all that it has done. But it has never been in confusion about what it ought to do in a given situation. Its mind has been very clear about how it should maximize advantage from the confusion and opportunism of others.

The dilemmas of peace

The peace process currently under way comes from the heart of the people of the South, and is an opportunity not to be mislaid. The government must be constantly checked to ensure that it occupies the moral high ground and sees its first obligation as meeting the aspirations of the Tamil people and not only towards appeasing the LTTE. Any dilution of democracy in the South, any perceived attacks on free expression, will work to the detriment of the peace process. It must be remembered that the main constraint on the LTTE is the overwhelming desire for peace on the part of the Tamil people

at last given sound hope, thanks to to the initiative of the government and the masses of the South, which brought about a change in perceptions.

But how much the opening in the South is deeply rooted is another question. The people who became cynical about the UNP regimes urgently needed a change. They began to suspect every aspect of UNP's policies which also created conditions in which the whole rationale for the war arose. The PA leadership had taken a very positive approach on the ethnic issue during the election campaigns which was unparalleled in post independence politics. But to translate the positive sentiments into corresponding actions and produce adequate results needs to overcome several obstacles ahead. As we mentioned earlier the LTTE's politics or for that matter the dominant Tamil politics is not going to help in removing such obstacles.

Of course the institutional inertia built in the state machinery due to past ideological manipulations will not wither away in the near future. During the negotiation for political solution taken a firm foot the demands which will matters day day today life of the people further pursued. The implementation of a political solution will face a lot more obstacles.

There are Tamil opinion-makers constantly trying to push the message that ultimately the Sinhalese cannot be trusted and any Sinhalese government will betray the Tamils. They do not acknowledge the healthy change in the South, which is still snaccant plant. Instead of taking responsibility to help it to grow to maturity, they would do everything to frustrate and destroy it. Should the peace process fail, they would be the happiest to boast about their prophetic prescience in 'having always been right about the Sinhalese'. Their Sinhalese counterparts are also waiting in the sidelines to compliment them.

With the prospect of renewed war not to be taken lightly, serious thought must be given to how the army is going to respond to contingency. Even if understanding the LTTE phenomenon could prove daunting, the least the activist groups should press the government to do, is to examine the cause of the armed forces' abysmal failure all these years and do something about it.

As things stand there is the very serious danger that if conflict were to resume, an angry army would again take it out on Tamil civilians in the East, while bombs and shells rain on Jaffna. then much of what was gained by the initiatives taken would be lost. After all these years of tragedy there has been no frank appraisal accompanied by institutional changes to ensure that the forces do not respond according to the agenda determined by the LTTE.

The peace process must be pursued even if the chances of immediate success are low. However, it would seem that so much hope has been placed on the success of present negotiations and the continuance of the ceasefire, with little thought given to alternative and more likely scenarios. When things do go wrong the elite who influenced decisions and are responsible for misjudgments could shrug their shoulders and walk away to other gainful pursuits. But who is going to be responsible for the people who bear the brunt of misjudgments? This unchanging propensity to go on repeating the same blunders every few years is among the biggest intellectual and moral failures in the South.

A large share of the responsibility in securing the peace lies also with the Tamil elite. It is their responsibility to understand and renounce the hypocrisy and double standards that legitimise the LTTE brand of nationalism. We should stop talking and behaving as though all what this politics has made the ordinary people of the North-East pay in blood, ruin, mental trauma, torture and pervasive insecurity is in order to enable their class of Tamils to move with 'dignity and security'. Why all these people have died, why are so many innocent young being involuntarily taken away from their parents to bear arms to sustain this cause needs to be answered. We also need to be sensitive to the perceptions of ordinary sinhalese people who also have their experience of the LTTE. When the Tamil elite are seen giving credence to unreasonable demands of the LTTE it helps to reinforce discredited Sinhalese nationalist postions.

We also need to get away from the notion that we could go on blaming the State and the Sinhalese while pretending that Tamils being the victims, atrocious behaviour by their so-called leaders is of no relavance. That could only give us some perverse pleasure in bringing out the worst in others while inexorably destroying ourselves ■

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