

Briefing No. 3

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Issues Of Peace & The Primacy of the Political Thrust

Two of our reports were in the press a few months ago and this we welcome. In comparison with what prevailed 15 years ago, there is today space in the South for a variety of conflicting expressions. But the underlying message in the media is by and large, still tilted towards preserving totalitarian and hegemonic attitudes in society. In this context a number of items have also appeared in the press which have cited our reports, some of which may give a wrong impression of our work to those not familiar with it. This demands some clarification from us.

Our purpose for more than the last ten years has been to make all parties to the conflict accountable. The rapid internal changes within the Tamil community in the four years from July 1983, in a symbiotic engagement with state-inspired and state-articulated violence had created a novel situation. In its blood-spattered attempt to become the sole representatives of the Tamil people, the LTTE brought about deep disillusionment, forcing it to rely on child recruits. It found itself closing all space for open reflection on where this course was taking the Tamils. Violence deliberately aimed at provoking reprisals and bringing insecurity to the Tamil people became its sole means of advancing its image as their liberators. This was evident in their sabotaging any prospect of a healthy political process at various times, especially during peace talks.

It was therefore clear to us in 1987 that if the main objective of non-violent activism was to hold the State accountable, so as to usher in a healthier political process, that stage had passed in 1983. It was no longer adequate to expose the State or state forces alone. Some of the most obdurate sources of continued anarchy and unending conflict had shifted to within the body politic of Tamil society. The involvement of some of us in writing the 'the Broken Palmyra' in the heat of the war with the Indian Army, was intended to state the truth frankly about the sufferings of the civilians and the actions of the armed parties. By so doing we principally tried to open up space by getting the readers to ask themselves what was happening within their community.

It also became clear to us, and to many others, that state violence against Tamils, negation of democracy and internal violence in the South, as well as in the North-East, are, all of them, manifestations of the same phenomenon. This was evident in the Southern violence of the late 80s coming on the heels of July 1983 and the subsequent militarisation of the State. The commencement of the war in June 1990 saw an increased outbreak of malignancy on the part of the State as well as the LTTE. Where the role of the media was concerned, they were dark times.

Thus opening up space had to be a joint endeavour involving communities in all parts of the country. Our own efforts too were aimed in this direction. In our reports we sought to tell the whole truth as best as we could, bringing out what our own connections enabled us to do, as others could not. We documented in the early 90s a good deal of the suffering in the East inflicted by the state forces, which had assumed unprecedented proportions; along with the depredations of the LTTE and its arrogant ideological violence against Muslim communities.

We had right along in our reports articulated the view that there was indeed an ethnic problem built up over decades by the State's anti –minority ideological stance. This was reflected at its worst by bouts of communal violence from 1956, when the country's leadership was found wanting in both will and human feeling to quench the flames lit by their intemperate words. The alienation of the minorities was in place well before the violence of rebellion. The problem, whatever one wishes to call it, became much more difficult to disentangle, leave alone understand, when the violence of rebellion or liberation, transformed itself into ubiquitous internal terror, silencing the saner voices within the Tamil community.

Along with many in the South who supported us, we realised that the crisis within the Tamil community was so deep that it was in the South that things were bound to open up sooner - as happened after the split in the ruling UNP in 1991. Our reports too, from the 90s were aimed in part at a southern audience. We also raised the issue of state-sponsored colonisation - the largest single factor behind alienation in the East. The violence that erupted in the Gal-Oya and Padaviya schemes in 1956 and 58 went a long way to form distrust of the intentions of the State that came to be entrenched in folk attitudes.

Our Special Report No 5 of 1993 and Bulletin No 5 of 1995 on the Weli Oya scheme exposed what was in fact a realisation of one of the worst travesties of the stated developmental aims of state-sponsored colonisation. Life had been made a nightmare for the Tamil civilians driven away by calculated state violence as well as for the Sinhalese civilians inducted in to act as civilian shields and chattels of the security forces.

Many in the South who were looking for a democratic and non-sectarian vision for Sri Lanka welcomed our reports and took them in the spirit they were meant. It is because of our faith in the democratic potential in the South and in the good sense of the Sinhalese and Muslim people at large, that we have no hesitation in being frank about the hypocrisy, opportunism and destructiveness that prevails among leading sections of the Tamil community. These sections are ultimately the most harmful to their own people. They had a choice, unlike the LTTE leadership who had burnt their boats. Without the aid of these sections, the LTTE would have been a disembodied organism. Among their greatest achievements is to have a good part of the world believe that there is a liberation struggle going on in the North-East; whereas the shameful reality is that on the one hand the children are being deliberately conditioned to fight and die for a lie, while the others, particularly the vocal supporters of this cause, have sought safety. These sections today have the temerity to desecrate universities in the west by holding intellectual conferences to promote the LTTE as a liberator, while on the ground children, women and men are being forced to undergo LTTE training to receive government rations.

In trying to find space for the people, these sections within Tamil society need to be exposed, along with their counterparts in the South. Both play complementary roles in sustaining the conflict, and in stifling any breathing space for democratic accountability.

It is also a sad reflection on the part of the Sinhalese community that even after a prolonged and gruesome war, which is destroying the very basis of society, there are even today intellectuals and politicians who are unable to come out of their blinkered view of Sri Lankan history. The total failure of the nation building process as well as how the Sri Lankan state steadily lost its legitimacy among the Tamil people by its partisan intolerance, is after all so obvious to everyone else. Even the Sinhalese dominated Army sent to counter the rebellion of the Tamil youth in the North – East, think and act as though they are in an alien land. This

itself brings out the truth. It is in sharp contrast to the situation in India, such as in the case of Punjab. The success of the Indian State in reflecting the diverse character of the society up to a level could also be attributed to the mass mobilisation and the healthier approach of the Indian Congress led by Mahatma Ghandi during the freedom struggle. Its legacy still maintains its momentum, although in recent times India faces severe challenges on all fronts.

But the attainment of independence in Sri Lanka had little to do with mass mobilisation or any vibrant struggle. Hence when the British colonial power left our shores, implanting a modern state formation in its infancy, it soon became a tool of leading sections of the majority community, leading to communal politics on both sides, as it became the easiest means to get votes in the parliamentary system. The rest is history!

Thus Sri Lanka had failed dismally in its endeavour to build a national identity following independence and the state has alienated the minorities and made them insecure on several fronts. This is self-evident to anyone who seriously thinks about the future generation and its well-being. To deny this and to go on burning night oil in proving that the Tamils have a hidden agenda and that there is no need for a fresh start and new political arrangement to give confidence to the Tamils as well as the other minorities, is symptomatic of the perverted mindset of some intellectuals. Although they are a handful and do not reflect the ordinary people's interest or their desire for peace, they have easy access to the media in promoting their ideas. It in turn reinforces the fear of the Tamils that nothing is going to come out of the South which would give them political space to express their identity.

On the other hand, if we go beyond the dominant media propaganda and analyse the people's feelings, fears, and their experience, we see there much potential for peace in this land. This is true on both sides of the communal divide. On that basis, what we have consistently advocated is for all those concerned with peace and democracy to prevail on the Government to strictly enforce observance of basic human rights even under the trying conditions of war, and to move decisively to remedy the underlying causes of political grievances among the Tamils. The present government's moves in this direction are yet to enter anything like a decisive stage. Given this situation, the normal effects of war on the civilians are enough for the LTTE and its world-wide allies in influential positions to sustain and justify their cause.

Keeping the Political Initiative at the Forefront

In this connection we need to correct some instances where our reports have been quoted in a manner that distorts our message, conveying an impression that is less than fair by us. In the Foreword to 'A Tamil Heroine Unmourned' our criticism of the UNP's and TULF's call for unconditional talks with the LTTE was based primarily on the grounds that the demand was not seriously meant, besides being irresponsible and opportunistic.

On the part of the TULF it deep down knows the character of the LTTE and the immense damage it is doing to the Tamil community. But it never challenges them politically, always trying to play safe thinking that eventually some one will destroy it for them to be in politics. On the other hand they never touch the crucial issues which affect the Tamil community, such as child recruitment, the brutal internal violence to suppress dissent and other evils. If the TULF is serious in demanding that Government should talk to the LTTE without conditions, they as the chief Tamil parliamentary party must give some reassurance that they would take some responsibility for the process and play a role to make the LTTE represent people's

interest during the process. Without addressing these questions, the TULF's call is simply a political ploy to avoid the serious issues concerning peace and their own role in Tamil society.

In the case of the UNP the demand for talks between the Government and the LTTE is purely a means to cover up its lack of commitment and its failure to engage constructively in the Government's attempt to clear the political hurdles towards ending the conflict. The leader of the party uttered various things to various audiences and even went to the extent of saying at one point that the UNP is for anti-symmetric devolution, and that for the North-East they were prepared go beyond the present package. Recently the UNP leader has been saying that the package is too much and that his party will not be able to support it in its present form. As a programme for negotiating with the LTTE one could see the hypocrisy and absurdity of this position. Hence its advocacy of talks with the LTTE are baseless.

Our own position has little to do with '[militarily] crushing the LTTE forthwith' that is imputed in the use of our report by 'Citizen D' in the Island (13th November 1998). The advocates of this line have learnt nothing from its dismal failure for over 20 years with no end in sight. They have to take refuge behind contending that the 'crushing' line has not been tried hard enough or ruthlessly enough.

The Mainsprings of War

Thus the continuance of the war and its accompanying misery has two mainsprings. One is the lack of a sense of urgency over the political settlement and measures for redress by the Government and civil society in the South. The other is the combination of silence, fatal opportunism and dissimulation on the part of Tamil society, particularly at the higher levels. For the present there is little hope from this quarter until there is sufficient movement in the South, such as would give hope and demolish the mischievous canard about the 'Sinhalese State' being the 'Ultimate Enemy'. Clearly, it was far from enough for the Government to be talking about the political settlement for four years, while the daily experience of the Tamils in a climate of continuing conflict provides fertile ground for propaganda about the 'Ultimate Enemy'.

It is this unsettled political climate which greatly helps an organisation like LTTE to get away with its present methods of terror, elimination and virtual press-ganging of the impressionable young. As long as the Government's primary concern is with the war, it would find it hard to match the LTTE. A democratic government cannot recruit the way the LTTE does and carry on with impunity. Not only would it lead again to further dehumanisation of the society and the destruction of the remaining vestiges of Southern civil society, as it had happened in the North-East.

Our main thrust has always been to openly challenge the trends that brought tragedy to our community, and not to cover up the reality of the Tamil community and glorify its violence in order to promote the continuing tragedy. It is ironical that the very thing we are fighting against is being promoted in South by quoting our reports. We argued always that the main thrust from the South must necessarily be political.

Among the Tamils, there are many in this country who have a clear vision and the long term interests of the Tamils at heart. Despite all the negative signals from the South and omissions and commissions of the Government, they are clear that the politics of the LTTE can never deliver anything meaningful and healthy to the Tamils. Moreover they understand that the

deeds of the LTTE further enhance and reinforce the ultra-nationalist elements in the South, so delaying any prospect of peace. But their opinions are being suppressed by the terror of the LTTE and the narrow nationalist ideological milieu now prevailing in the Tamil media. Hence any analysis of the LTTE, its politics, and the nature of Tamil political life is suppressed in the Tamil media. Moreover, when individuals point this out in other fora they are subtly campaigned against as quislings using Sinhalese owned media or State media, thus in effect suppressing the issues.

In this kind of political and social environment the ordinary people with various doubts and anxieties are forced to keep their views to themselves. They can only repeat standard clichés dished out by the so called opinion makers in the media as a form of escapism. Such are for example that negotiations should be held only on the basis of the 'Thimpu principles'. Therefore those who are deeply anguished about the nature of things in Tamil society continue to be isolated and their voices will continue to be strangled unless there comes a decisive change in the southern political landscape, which can be clearly seen by the ordinary Tamil people as representing a change of heart among the majority. Only then can the Tamil people say with assurance that there is an alternative, and there is absolutely no rationale for destroying a generation of youth to feed a cause of opportunists and megalomaniacs. In turn the LTTE and other political actors who take shelter under nationalist ideology and rhetoric to cover-up their bankruptcy would find themselves in serious difficulty.

Hence, by avoiding seeing the complex reality in which ordinary people are trapped, many, by asking simple questions such as how is a political package is going to solve the problem and whether LTTE will accept it, argue for total military solution. This further corners the ordinary people into LTTE's trap. On the other hand the major task of the State is to regain its lost legitimacy among the Tamils. For this, those in the south need to go beyond discussing the nature of the LTTE and its actions alone. When that happens, they will also acquire a moral right to challenge the Tamils and make them play a more positive role in building peace and to make a new beginning. Instead, quarrelling over the right amount of food for civilians in the Vanni and putting up unnecessary bureaucratic structures, such as cumbersome pass systems, in every sphere of the ordinary people's life are signs that the Government is on the wrong track. The people know that the LTTE takes away food by the truckloads irrespective of what the people get. With a few thousands of rupees changing hands the whole string of bureaucratic hurdles could be overcome and finally only the innocent and the poor suffer. Hence, the Government politically loses much by being seen to be callous and vindictive.

As we said earlier, apart from duplicity within the Tamil community, owing to the dominant political mores there has always been a vocal section within the Sinhalese community who have been prime movers behind violence and intolerance. The chief beneficiaries of their work in ruling out any political accommodation by simply denying that there is an ethnic problem, are the merchants and shadowy interests spawned by war. Although they need to be challenged as much as their counterparts within the Tamil community, it has not been our primary concern.

The reasons are two fold. Firstly there is a total silence and lack of transparency that has been imposed on the Tamil community from within. So that trying to tell this aspect the truth on behalf of all those who want an end to the war has been a demanding task by itself. Secondly the task of challenging the chauvinist lobby in the South is now being done quite ably by people there. Moreover like-minded groups in the South have both used and publicised in Sinhalese our reporting of violations by the State in the North-East, while we have been

largely shut out by the Tamil press. On the other hand when we were almost alone in documenting and publicising the massive violations by the State in the early 90s, our material was considered too hot for the press under the prevailing climate of fear in Colombo, where falling foul of the State and the mixed bag of paramilitary groups continued to be dangerous

It is a paradoxical situation which we are in. That is, when we challenge certain values and political trends in our community which are detrimental to the interests of the people, our writings are at times used to attack those in the South who similarly challenge chauvinist ideology while trying to expose the root causes of intolerance and bigotry. On the other hand arguments that our criticisms of Tamil politics are being used by the State are used to adduce that we are working for the State. This was an issue we were continuously faced with. Our answer has always been that short-term political thinking based on strategies and tactics has no meaning when dealing with malignant phenomena such as fascist formations. We believe that in the long run our work can bring some sanity back to the community, and it is this that is crucial for both the community and us. When basic values of humanity are in crisis, talking about tactical and strategical manipulations and their implications becomes a shameful ploy to avoid facing the present tragedy squarely and responsibly. This is morally indefensible!

Because of the complex situation which the LTTE manipulates and thrives in, we had to raise issues with individuals and organisations who, although raising issues regarding negative aspects of the Sinhalese polity are sometimes unable to understand, or when they do, try to avoid implications arising out of the singular nature of the LTTE. This arises from two reasons. Being Sinhalese and feeling guilty for what had happened in the past, they feel shy to question the Tamil side. This is understandable. Secondly, once one begins to understand the nature of the LTTE and its dynamism, it becomes difficult to formulate a strategy for peace. And so they skirt this dilemma and campaign for peace with catchy slogans such as asking the Government to stop the war.

Then there is also a small section in the South with legitimate anger against the State and the Southern polity. Being unable to challenge the latter with their political outlook, they feel good when forces like LTTE challenge them in a very destructive manner. These egocentric attitudes are transient phenomena. For, we have seen several individuals in the South whose views on the Tamil Nation's Right of Self Determination was so strident that they even attacked as traitors and renegade Marxists, Tamil activists who were questioning the cry for Eelam. In a matter of few years they became advisors and torchbearers of VIPs in the Southern political establishment. These impermanent revolutionaries have no sense of values regarding the core of the Marxist agenda, which is human emancipation, as we understand it. For them all Marxist jargon are tools for their 'emancipation' from obscurity to fame and to cover up their political ambitions.

Similarly there are Tamils who had challenged the narrow nationalism in the early days of the militant struggle, who have now transformed themselves into champions of the so called principle of self-determination, by ignoring the fact that the whole society at present is trapped in a fascist grip. By playing safe and indirectly legitimising the LTTE's destructive politics they do more harm to the Tamil community than anyone else. These types of people easily manipulate the progressive sections with a guilty conscience in the South and others who want token Tamil representation in their movement or organisation.

The specific character of the LTTE

The LTTE prostrated the whole community to a point where without much protest it was able to ban all other organisations and also close all democratic space. This is in contrast to situations in other countries, where it happened not during the process of the struggle, but after, during the competition for state power.

We certainly believe that the LTTE as a totalitarian phenomenon in a context where the remnants of civil society have abdicated, must be exposed and decisively defeated politically. The history of misgovernment and the disproportionate publicity given to intransigent opinions on both sides has made this task difficult by creating confusion about the true nature of the LTTE. We had also stated before that merely calling upon the Government, as some Tamil parties, Southern peace groups and political groups do, to stop the war and talk to the LTTE is meaningless. Such calls may seem `politically right' by not taking into account the nature of LTTE, the predicament of the Tamil people, the character of Tamil society at this juncture and, more importantly, our own responsibility to ensure at the same time that these talks lead to a permanent peace.

The fact of the matter is that the total paralysis of society made ordinary Tamil people powerless, and thus unable to have any serious impact on the LTTE. Every time when there were peace talks most of them hoped that something would come out. At the same time they knew at the back of their mind that it was wishful thinking on their part as they had repeatedly experienced the tell-tale signs from the LTTE's conduct at ground level. When invariably the LTTE restarted the war and plunged the community into unwanted violence again, there was no prospect of their having even a small gathering in the North-East to protest against it. That is the reality regarding prospects for genuine peace activity among the Tamils.

Even armed groups elsewhere, which had totalitarian tendencies, and were fighting for causes, generally had inhibitions against overtly claiming for themselves the status of sole representatives. Due to this social reality they never succeeded in totally paralysing the community. Indirectly this provided much space for the people to evaluate their predicament. Despite several community leaders being under threat of violence, the IRA could not control the whole civil society. This was evident whenever there were acts of violence perpetrated by the IRA against civilian targets. The churches and other civil organisations, as well as democratic parties among the Catholic community, were able to voice their outrage and even mobilise the people to protest. Of course there was a sizeable section of the people who were sympathetic to the IRA as it articulated the gut feeling of a community which was feeling insecure and experiencing overt discrimination. Moreover, there was some space for political activity within the IRA, which allowed the political wing to influence the direction of movement and to reflect the mood of the people.

By banning or indirectly assimilating all sections of society, the LTTE has forced the remaining political groups to do survival politics with out any principle or purpose. In most of the other former Tamil militant organisations, the healthier elements have left and only the degenerate elements continue functioning with a very dubious political agenda.

The extra-ordinary violent history of the LTTE, based on the role of the Leader as Superman and its motto `the thirst of the Tigers is for the Thamil Eeela motherland' needs to be understood in depth. The suicidal cult centred around the Leader and its ramifications have never been studied properly. Tamil society is not so isolated from the outside world as to have only very brutish, simple and unsophisticated options. On the contrary it is a society dominated by a cosmopolitan middle class, which is very much alive to all avenues available

in the international arena. How then was it possible for a movement of the nature of the LTTE to come to dominance, recruit children and youths in their thousands and send them on a suicidal course with impunity? This is where the political character of the society at present needs to be grasped. Indeed, external conditions (such as state oppression and insecurity) were creating conditions for a nationalist struggle. But the causes for the form it took and how it transformed the whole society and its values need to be sought in internal factors governing modern Tamil society. These values plummeted to a level where hypocrisy and duplicity became the order of the day for many who pay lip service to the Tamil cause, while prompting large vulnerable sections to destroy themselves in the pyre of suicidal nationalism.

Unfortunately, the fascist characteristics, revealed, clearly may be difficult to grasp, as the LTTE has not quite taken on a state formation. We may at this point recall what we said in a statement issued immediately after the LTTE breached the cease-fire in 1994 (The Renewal of Hostilities: Keeping Issues in Perspective-A Statement with an Appeal: 8th May 1995):

..... A clear distinction needs to be drawn between the problem of the Tamils and the LTTE. The first needs to be addressed politically. The latter's emotional and irrational nature needs to be understood to grasp its dynamism. Its haunted past of murder and paranoia, invariably combined with its destructive course, has led to a situation where its isolated actions cannot be explained rationally. This has been the case historically, and for the Tamil community it has been both suicidal and ruinous.

Although the LTTE expressed a highly dramatised concern regarding deprivations affecting the day to day life of the Tamil people, they have shown total contempt for the latter's well-being and have used them as tools for their destructive brand of politics. The decision to embark on war when an overwhelmingly large section of the people yearns for peace, shows again the ingrained nature of the LTTE.

Its dehumanising politics that covers its crimes by rhetorically proclaiming the sanctity of the organisation could give meaning only in death to the thousands of youth fatalistically moulded into its leadership cult. It thus trapped itself into being accountable only to those cadres who had sacrificed their lives, leaving behind comrades who feel, even more strongly, that there is no meaning for them except to fight and die for Eelam. Consequently, it lost the ability to think of the needs of the living, whether cadre or people, except as sacrificial victims awaiting their turn. Hence it will singlemindedly use every means, without inhibition, in an attempt to achieve that aim. But it has very little prospect of stabilising itself whether in a local, regional or a global context. Therefore the LTTE has been most afraid for itself whenever there was a political drift holding out the restoration of accountability to the Tamil people, and on every such occasion it has stolen the initiative by a resort to precipitate violence...

Furthermore the military machinery the LTTE has built up with its international network, resulting in the destructive power the Leader has gained for conjuring up cheap human bombs in a purposefully paralysed society, gives a grandiose illusion of power. The yardstick, which we use in analysing normal individuals, often lead to wrong conclusions. Every individual has an ego, hunger for power, selfish as well as selfless motivations and several emotional needs. But many other factors determine which traits dominate in an individual's behavioural pattern. Inhibitions due to the fear-instinct, social and moral values, and how society will react, all play a constraining role. Hence inhibitions have positive as well as negative effects. But a person who overtly portrays himself as the Leader of a whole community, asking many

to swear oaths by him to commit suicide on being ordered, spurning normal inhibitions, cannot be analysed with a normal yardstick. It is not a question of the genuineness of the Leader or his cadre. It is about the community's responsibility in abdicating its future to an individual in a manner obtaining among Tamils. It says a great deal about the nature of such a community and its politics during that period of time. It is also a challenge for all who are concerned about humanity. Shrugging it off as the Tamil community's problem as many well-meaning people in the South do, is a sign of mistaken altruism.

We are bringing out these facts here to point out the reality and to show how complicated it is. At one level we see total arrogance in some quarters of the Sinhalese polity, treating the entire problem as a terrorist one, conveniently ignoring their role in creating a Frankenstein. This was done through degrading another community by subjecting its members to insecurity and hopelessness. At another level there is total disregard for the true nature of the dominant theme in Tamil political life by some influential sections of the peace lobby. This condemns the Tamils to a violent and insecure ghetto. Where the second trend is concerned, although we appreciate their problems, we cannot justify their inability to be creative in dealing with a specific reality that has been with us too long to feign ignorance of.

This is where many cross the thin line that exists between explaining a phenomenon and justifying it. When we become involved in social action these issues become very important. Analysing ethnic issues purely as an academic exercise often helps us to see certain critical factors. At the same time it leads several people to lose sight of grasping the essential social dynamism. Without understanding the pathological social factors, the LTTE would remain incomprehensible.

For example we in our reports cited several incidents where military personnel had behaved well and recorded our appreciation. Intellectuals concerned about structural analysis ask us if we are so blind to the nature of the State where individuals play necessarily an insignificant role. We are thereby accused of missing the wood for the trees. This does not arise from our ignorance of the role of institutions. But we are also aware of certain realities in which people function. As we started documenting events and what was behind them, we came across a clear pattern. That is, quite apart from the nature of the State and its actions, we saw the calculated acts of the LTTE which wants its own people killed and massacred to further its cause. The people were repeatedly left at the mercy of soldiers without any organised structures for their protection.

In 1990, when the war broke out in the East, Thirukkivil was placed between an army column moving from the north and an STF column moving from the south. Some prominent citizens from Thirukivil sensing what was in store after talking to the commander of the army column, quickly approached the STF and asked them to come to their village. [Rep N0 4,1990]. Do try to understand the plight of the people. The LTTE suddenly started the war on flimsy grounds to do with a minor incident concerning a tailor in Batticaloa and some army personnel.

Immediately they surrounded many police stations and asked the policemen to surrender. President Premadasa even ordered them to surrender. After disarming them, the LTTE killed all the Sinhalese and Muslim policemen at Rufus Kulam west of Thirukkivil. The Tamil policemen were beaten and chased off - many of them to be killed by the security forces later when they tried to report for work. The LTTE followed the killing of scores of Muslim policemen from the area by abducting and killing Muslim civilians at Kurukkal Madam. The

civilians were in a convoy of vehicles returning to Kattankudy. At this point the Muslim traders at Kattankudy were the only structure providing a lifeline to the Tamils otherwise cut off. Then followed the LTTE's massacres of Muslims at Kattankudy and Eravur. Where these actions placed the Tamils needs no elaboration. It was deliberate.

The LTTE were doing all these things in the process of withdrawing from urban centres in the East. All these acts were calculated provocations well knowing the vulnerability of the Tamil community. What was the Tamil community left with? Did they have any organised structures to defend their dignity or to handle intra and inter -community relations? Nothing!

The people in Thirukovil out of fear and insecurity decided to approach the STF, simply because it was earlier stationed in their village and they knew some officers who in turn gave them temporary reassurance.

After reading the chauvinistic material dished out regularly in a good section of the Southern media by so called learned intellectuals who represent the others as horrendous outsiders, the average man in uniform carrying a powerful weapon is left feeling very insecure in alien surroundings. When the LTTE provokes him in a manner calculated to take away all restraint, and he is still able to constrain himself and not lose his humanity, we should value him and this potential needs to be tapped in order to restore peace in this country. Peace means creating conditions where all communities could live in this island with self-respect and dignity. For that purpose any positive change in the character of the State is to be commended and should be welcomed.

We had also come across many army personnel who are trying to understand their role and are beginning to grasp the problem more clearly than the many so called 'Patriots' whose copious writings plant venom into future generations on both sides.

The Tamils have been placed in such a unique position by the LTTE, that merely recording human rights violations without showing appreciation for security officials who rise significantly above the average human level, becomes a barren exercise.

Siamese Twins

We certainly do not underestimate the huge task in the South resulting from partisan state ideology, reinforced by playing on the fears of the Sinhalese. If one is clear about the lack of political substance and the political vulnerability of the LTTE, as offering the people nothing tangibly human, then how to deal with it flows naturally. But in building up the LTTE's image as something formidable, the advocates of militarism in the South and their counterparts among the Tamils have been complementing each other. They have been jointly playing at a game of 'Emperor's New Clothes' with the LTTE.

How the two parties need each other like Siamese twins is evident from the fact that the articles of those like Nalin de Silva who maintain that there is no Tamil problem, but only a terrorist problem, were regularly translated from the Sinhalese or the English and publicised in the LTTE controlled media. On the other hand the advocates of the 'no Tamil problem' position in the South cover up their bankruptcy by giving publicity to defenders of the LTTE. By covering up for the crimes of the LTTE and identifying it with Tamil aspirations, those like Kumar Ponnambalam make the cause of the Tamils who have suffered a history of state oppression look novel, absurd and utterly unreasonable.

How close the two groups of pretended adversaries are is also revealed by the fact that they agree on some key suppositions and their approach to history and interpretations of events are very similar. It is for example important for both of them to maintain that the Sinhalese and Tamils have been distinct ethnic groups from time immemorial, almost fated to be bitter adversaries in perpetuity. Each one of the two imposes an unchanging core of evil intentions to the other.

Their use of history too shows how each corners itself into a position of belligerence. There are just about two kinds of Tamils who occur in Nalin de Silva's writings. Both are racists, with supposedly fictitious political grievances. One is of the moderate kind who seek a separate state through first getting federalism. The other kind seek it directly through violence. The drift of his mind is clear from the following taken from his recent articles in the Island:

“The Tamil racists would very much like to erase the Dutugemunu-Elara story from the history books, as it is the cornerstone of the formation of the Sinhala –Buddhist unitary state of this country.”(28.10.98)

“[Dutugemunu's] aim was very clear. Defeat the invader completely and protect the Buddha Sasana. No so-called political solutions, no peace talks with or without conditions...”
(7.10.98)

Dr. de Silva is quick to take issue with any scholar who suggests that these events of circa 100 BC were part of a feudal power game that were given an ideological twist by the Buddhist clerics who recorded them about 700 years later, so as to enhance the legitimacy of the royal line to which they were allied. More particularly, he fervently rejects any suggestion of diversity or pluralism in this country in early historic times, such as would challenge the early provenance of his monolithic Sinhalese–Buddhist unitary state. A corollary to this line of reasoning is that the Tamils can have no grievances or legitimate political claims because they were invaders or even destroyers. Legitimate rights are historical rights!

A key feature of such reasoning is 'argument from silence' – from the absence of records to the contrary. For example Nalin de Silva argues that there could have been no settled Tamil presence in this country in 100 BC because there are no records that suggest to him that there was a tribe called the Tamils anywhere in the world then. How misleading such an argument could be is not hard to see. Nothing survives of anything that was written in or about Britain before the Roman conquest in 55 BC. Moreover there were hardly any records in Britain other than in Latin - the language of the ancient Romans– until the 16th century AD. We know of nothing that is recognisably English from before the 10th century AD. But no one suggests that modern Englishmen in England should be looked upon as invaders. History is a complex phenomenon involving a constant flux people, ideas and influences.

Ideas such as those of the ancient unitary state in Sri Lanka protecting the Buddha Sasana are not just dogmatic history, but are totalitarian in character. It is similar to the ideology of England as the 'New Jerusalem' (Dhamma Dipa) conceived among the English gentry around 1650, after effectively suppressing the underclass that was clamouring for radical reform. Such ideologies are typically those of a ruling class which feels beleaguered from within.

Such lines of thinking which deny the existence of genuine political grievances among the Tamils today, have to dwell in myths, both ancient and modern, and fail to understand present issues reflecting the modern social and political reality.

Counterposed to those who stand by a cast iron Sinhalese unitary state are the mystifiers who promote the LTTE. Some of them who have scoured the early Tamil epics have come up with exciting stuff. The Tigers are said to be in effect a re-incarnation of the ancient Chera whose armies advanced to the Himalayas and the Cholas who conquered the Ganges basin. From these same sources rationalisations have also been found for suicide warriors and martial women. Just as the ancient unitary state myth has no bearing on today's problems, these myths which tease the vanity of elite and expatriate Tamil nationalists, have no relation to what is in the mind of an ordinary LTTE cadre, or to the disposition of long-suffering Tamil people desperate for peace and a chance to live as human beings.

A more sophisticated attempt at constructing a myth was put forward in the Weekend Express (5.12.98) by E.A.V. Naganathan in response to our 'A Tamil Heroine Unmourned....' He completely evades the moral questions posed by us regarding the LTTE's methods and implications for the peace. He suggests a parallel with Vichy France under the overlordship of Nazi Germany, with Mrs. Yogeswaran in the role of Marshal Petain. She was, one understands from Naganathan, in the role of a 'collaborationist', in a situation where 'the Geneva Convention rules do not apply to belligerents on the 'rebel' side.'

These suggestions are preceded by a factual account of the violence and progressive marginalisation the Tamils had experienced from the State. It is implied that against this base systematic conspiracy by Sinhalese leaders, the 'integrity and lofty gentlemanly qualities' of the Tamil leadership were of no avail. In posing this as a question at the end (what avail?) a strong implication is left about the role of the LTTE.

The same position is shared by those like Nalin de Silva except that the actors are reversed. Should it come as any surprise that Naganathan should find the observation "Tiger terrorism is Tamil Terrorism" attributed to Kamalika Pieris, usefully 'perspicuous'?

Our analysis of developments has always been that there never was, nor is, a conspiracy among either the Sinhalese masses or the Tamil masses. Political leaders on both sides made capital out of the politics of attributed conspiracy and all the people suffered in different ways. True, in a sense the politics was gentlemanly. The elite leaders on both sides for the most part had excellent personal relations and socialised in Colombo. But their politics, on both sides, acquired a vested interest in keeping the ordinary Tamil and Sinhalese people divided, while believing in the essential evilness of the other. Anyone challenging this preconception became a 'traitor' – a term popularised from gentlemanly Federal Party platforms and its propaganda sheet, the 'Suthanthiran'. Coming from this frame of mind, Naganathan's feelings about the Tigers are logical. The politics of the Tigers is a continuation of the same, even after the consequences of the TC-FP-TULF legacy have become repellingly evident.

The experiences over the last fifteen years involving the Muslims who were chased out of the North en-masse at four hours notice, the massacres of Muslim and Sinhalese civilians, and thousands of Tamil youths imprisoned and tortured to death by their fellows, also have an important impact on the present political dynamism. But these tragedies and the character of

the politics which perpetuates these crimes, evade these gentlemen whose consciences are frozen and suffer from selective amnesia, as do their counterparts among the Sinhalese.

In order to deceive the children of others and send them into horrifying deaths, the Tamil establishment and their media need to constantly falsify the true disposition of the Sinhalese people, turn them into ogres and continually belittle Sinhalese individuals whose public role offers hope.

The parallel with Vichy France is utterly inappropriate. To begin with it would suggest that the relationship of Sarojini Yogeswaran to Chandrika Kumartunga was similar to that between Petain and Adolf Hitler. It shows how absurd parallels are drawn to justify cast iron preconceptions and turn a blind eye to where the LTTE is leading the people. An analysis to the effect that the communalism of the Sri Lankan State caused the problem and that there is little hope in the Southern polity solving the problem, is defensible. Few would contest the first proposition. The second may be treated as a debatable proposition or a challenge for political action. But from this one cannot jump to the conclusion that the LTTE is the answer or that any responsible Tamil could take a morally neutral position as regards the LTTE.

Vichy France too had its rationalisations, which implied moral compromises. The latter included throwing French Jews to the Nazi wolves. The situation has some resemblance to Jaffna under LTTE rule when dissidents were rounded up by the thousands, and many of whom were killed. Whenever the state forces were responsible for violations, the people were not forced into such abject and far-reaching moral compromises.

Here again we encounter the deviousness of the LTTE as a social phenomenon. The LTTE would not own up to killing Sarojini Yogeswaran, and if pressed, is likely to deny it. But then several Tamils feel impelled to come forward and explain or justify the killing – even while rhetorically disapproving it - on the presumption that the LTTE was the culprit. In this climate of evasion, the international organisations, which operate within a rigid legal framework, fail to put their finger on anything tangible where the LTTE is concerned.

The concept of a Tamil traditional homeland is another topic now being debated with much vigour. To us the present argument over history is largely meaningless. What is meaningful is to understand and remedy recent historical trends which created conditions for a section of the people to feel that the North – East is their homeland. Anyone studying the modern history with an objective mind will easily understand how the Tamils began to feel and to cling on to the North-East as their homeland as a place where they could be free of violence to say the least. The political process which reflected and harnessed that fear and insecurity took the form of the Tamil nationalist struggle. This in turn led to various arguments and agendas, and also created myths and new political concepts. In Tamil society too there are no doubt various formations, regional differences and interests. But it is the overwhelming strength of the perceived threat from the Sri Lankan State which gave vitality to the homeland concept in the political agenda. It will no doubt lose its importance when there are concrete moves towards peace through removing that fear. This would also involve transforming the political landscape and the character of the State to address the present reality.

The formation of a nation could therefore happen for reasons quite apart from demands for the intrinsic rights of a pre-existing group. Group feeling and solidarity are themselves dynamic phenomena – often a response to perceived collective oppression. There may be certain conditions conducive for the formation of a nation without necessarily leading to

separate nationhood. We pointed out earlier the internal factors which created conditions for the Tamils to slowly and steadily fall back on nationalist ideology. Often there are external factors such as happened in Bangladesh, where the involvement India solidified certain demands rendering them achievable. On the other hand the politics of Tamil society has shown its inability to rise above differences, marshal a common programme, and so unify the Tamil nationalist struggle into a coherent form. What we continue to see on both sides are the same destructive tendencies after decades of repeated failure. The LTTE which time and again made the same blunders is still able to hold the Tamil people as hostages only due to the same unimaginative blunders being made by the State and the Southern polity.

Without understanding the dynamism of concepts such as nationhood and the basis for their vitality, if we merely attack them, treating them as static or historically defined concepts, we only end up enhancing them. Hence whether Eelam becomes a reality or not, depends very much on the ability of the Southern political establishment to rise up to the occasion and deal with the problem more creatively

What extremists on both sides are doing to confuse issues by painting the other ethnic group as uniformly subhuman, and amenable only to brute force. Both continue to play their role in assuring the LTTE with long life, while destroying the social and moral fabric of this country. They are both enemies of peace and sanity and must be exposed as such.

Need for clarity on Negotiations:

With peace-talks having once more become topical after the LTTE leader's apparent offer of third-party mediation and Balasingham turning up in London, there is a need for greater clarity about issues. A number of Tamils eager to sweep many moral problems under the carpet, had very insincerely jumped to promote the Leader's offer as genuine. A number of persons have interpreted our stance as being against peace talks of any kind. We have only been honest in saying on the basis of our understanding of the LTTE's inner nature and its accumulation of crimes flowing from this, that it has ruled out any accommodation with peace as meaning a return to basic human freedoms. But this does not mean that we rule out talks with the LTTE.

What has after all been its recent record? The killing of two elected mayors in Jaffna, an MP and several harmless and elderly local councillors, a systematic targeting of political opponents, shooting down a passenger flight deliberately and virtually abducting children for a war the people desperately do not want. It is much easier for the Tamil elite spokesmen to blame the Government and talk about the LTTE leader being genuine, than to face up to these internal issues. The same old story is heard from the LTTE Leader again – occupied areas, the Government having to solve the day-to-day needs of the people and third party talks which were accepted and spurned by him in 1995. In 1995 while giving the impression of wanting peace to an international audience, the people of Jaffna were being told by the LTTE that it was all eyewash. The same has happened in the Vanni after the LTTE leader's much publicised speech in late November. Karikalan, a senior leader, reportedly told the people that the Leader's speech was “tactical”.

These circumstances make talking to the LTTE a paradoxical exercise. There is also continual international pressure on the Government to talk to the LTTE. But we as the people must urge talks not because the LTTE wants peace, which it cannot, but because the people of this country want peace. From this point of view, offers to mediate by persons of renown must be

treated as an opportunity. These offers could bear fruit only if we use all means of pressure to ensure that the Government is seen to be adequately clean. Only this could prevent much of the confusion that would arise when talks are held with the LTTE.

On the other hand the Southern polity, especially the PA and UNP, need to come to an understanding and put forward a common programme to give confidence to the people that there is something meaningful on offer. The present UNP's stand on the matter is the worst possible way to deal with the LTTE. The UNP wants the Government to accept the LTTE Leader's apparent offer to talk, while it has been very unhelpful about getting a political package through.

Moreover, if the LTTE are serious about any political solution through negotiation, they need to demand that both the PA and UNP should come clean on a common framework to start negotiations. And the negotiations should be primarily about the content of this framework rather than any other issue.

Another important aspect which creates a lot of confusion is the nature of Tamil society at the moment. Unless there is some democratic space actively created during negotiations for the people to express their opinions, the whole exercise would lead to a much worse situation. It is not going to be an easy task. Whenever anyone tries to expand democratic space for the Tamil people, there is going to be the cry of foul-play by the LTTE and the peace lobbies. During the 1995 negotiations certain peace groups, individuals and even the Bishop of Jaffna were crying foul, accusing the Government of trying to create a gulf between the Tamil people and the LTTE. Such accusations coming from Jaffna is not difficult to understand, knowing who was doing the prompting there. But when a section of the peace lobby here did the same, the overall confusion among peace activists becomes evident. If LTTE believes that the people are behind them, then of course there is no need for them to worry. They can overcome any strategic manipulation of the State by campaigning against it, and educating the masses without a resort to intimidatory methods. But we know the ruthlessness of the LTTE when it comes to any form of independent activity. In this event, is it not important that the peace lobbies in the South should see this clearly and bring out the opinion of the silent majority who are trapped there?

To treat the LTTE as the sole representatives of the Tamils in any manner would be counterproductive, both to the Tamils as well as to the cause of peace. They have held out to the Tamils nothing but the promise of doom and destruction. There is a problem of insecurity and alienation faced by the Tamils requiring political redress. Leaving this in default would allow the LTTE to steal the clothes of a liberation force. The liberation struggle was over in 1986. A struggle where children of the underclass are thrown to lions in the ring, while the others applaud from the sides, like in a Roman circus, is a parody of a liberation struggle. It is a crime that reflects badly on the whole society.

Hence any peace process needs to have built in strategies to create space for people to express their opinions and assert themselves. But the fear of the LTTE has been being internalised by the masses to such an extent that the slightest whisper of 'peace talks' brings about the fear that the LTTE is going to come back. This in turn produces a typical knee-jerk reaction and the people become alert about doing anything 'inappropriate'. On the other hand there is also the question of the survival of the community. The survival instinct in individuals brings about a predictable behavioural pattern in a totalitarian formation. But when the danger is so severe that the whole community's survival is at stake, there comes a time where a few

individuals will withstand the terror and raise their voice. In recent times we do see a few voices coming out from the Tamil establishment against extremist violence. Hence it is important that the peace process should tap this potential. But unfortunately the kind of peace processes we have been having, always tend to drive the saner voices further into oblivion.

What is needed here can only be done by the peace movements. We cannot expect the State to do that. Peace movements should understand the long-term interest of the people in achieving lasting peace. This depends on two things. The first is to work towards finding a political framework which will remove insecurity and allow those who feel alienated due to their ethnic affiliation to have political space. But more importantly it is essential that the ideologies built around narrow nationalist perspectives be marginalised on all sides. This alone will guarantee that any agreed formal arrangement will lead to a lasting peace. We know that the different partisan ideologies brought havoc to all. But they cannot be erased by simply campaigning against them in isolation. That is why we need concrete political reforms to deal with the existing reality. But it does not guarantee a new beginning unless enlightened forces take responsibility for the future.

Today the intellectual as well as moral failures of the peace lobbies and what were once the progressive sections have created new dangers. Their simple slogans such as calling upon the Government to talk to the LTTE without any reference to the democratic rights of the Tamil people, or inviting the LTTE to join the Southern progressives and overthrow the capitalist state, have failed to convince anyone. With declining conviction and seriousness, these sections have fragmented, unable to put forward a common programme, and unable to offer the people the leadership they seek. Instead, their slogans seem to be addressed to a foreign audience, even making such fantastic claims as Madhu having been a liberated area until the Army got there.

By their default they have created space for groups like the National Movement Against Terrorism and the Sinhala Vira Vidhana which tap the uncertainly created among the Sinhalese by the politics of the LTTE and its cohorts, Thus giving new life to ideas and slogans from the darkest recesses of this country's post – independence history. The obverse of this is the injection of fresh vigour into the LTTE's destructive mobilisation. Surely, it is high time for those who stand for peace and humanity to make a bold re-evaluation.