

Sri Lanka's Separatist Conflict: The Sources of Intractability

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Abstract

The separatist struggle in the north and east of Sri Lanka has lasted for nearly 20 years, a protracted mid-intensity war of attrition. A fairly large and substantially armed military has been unable to break the back of the guerrillas while the latter has been unable to capture and control the principal centres of Tamil settlements in the north and east of the country. Attempts to resolve the conflict through negotiations have failed. The principal obstacle to such a resolution is the nature of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. The LTTE is not a political party and has seldom aspired to be one; it is, in essence, a small but powerful guerrilla army, with a clear political objective—the establishment of a separatist Tamil state in the north and east of the island. It has shown no inclination to settle for anything less than that and holds fast to the view expressed by one of its ideologues that the only negotiations should be on what the borders of that state should be.

I The LTTE's Challenge

"The first fights are for blood and land, the final fights for myth."
- Boston Teran¹

It is not an ethnic conflict and it is. It is an ethnic conflict and it is not. The hawks are wrong when they say it is a law and order problem or simply one of terrorism. The hawks do not see it. Be an eagle, fly higher and you can. It is not an ethnic conflict in the sense that it is no longer primarily one. Nineteen fifty eight was an ethnic conflict. So was Bindunuwewa² and Talawakele³ too. But it is no longer 1958 and that is not the main thing that is happening. What it is, is war. It is not an insurgency, a low-intensity conflict, which it was in the 1980s. It is a mid-intensity war, and it is a protracted war, not in the sense that the Tamil guerrillas are fighting a protracted people's war of a Chinese or Vietnamese sort. It is protracted in that it has been a long war, a long secessionist war and a long counter-secessionist war, two decades and counting.

The thing with protracted wars the world over is that either one side is bled out and relinquishes its grip on the contested terrain, which means the other side wins, or a prolonged hurting stalemate makes for a breakthrough to negotiations because both sides know that they can not win. Or the war simmers at the margins, in the jungles and the mountains, occasionally flaring into the towns but never directly determining the nation's destiny. Sri Lanka's protracted war—our war—is different. It intensifies, escalates, drives onto a higher plateau of violence and it stays the main axis of current history. In two decades, El Salvador's powerful guerrilla movements settled for negotiations in less time. Guatemala's brutal army beat down the revolutionaries' dreams, enabling the elected government to talk seriously to the men and women in the mountains. Mao liberated the world's most populous nation and Giap triumphed over the world's mightiest superpower in less time.

Nothing of the sort has happened here. The world's most ruthless and deadly guerrilla army has been unable to liberate a relatively small territory. A fairly large and substantially armed military has been unable to break the back of the guerrillas. It has been a tale of mutual attrition, but the war has not been pushed aside to sputter away. Nor is Vellupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), serious about a negotiated settlement. He is not even ready for a process of negotiations which does not entail de-facto military withdrawal by the government. The army is strapped for troops and the economy for resources. When the LTTE concentrates its forces, and goes on the offensive it suffers heavy punishment. Yet the state and the Tigers slug it out, and do so with undiminished intensity. (Indeed I expect Prabhakaran to round off, 2001, his designated 'Year of War' with something of a flourish). Why? Why has mutual exhaustion not taken hold, forcing a de-escalation, leading eventually to genuine attempts at a negotiated settlement? Part of the answer lies of course in the intrinsic character of the LTTE: politically fundamentalist, programmatically 'maximalist' and behaviourally fascist. The other part of the answer is that Prabhakaran thinks that this war is winnable, or more precisely, not unwinnable. He thinks that the intrinsic weaknesses of the Sinhalese, the no-less intrinsic contradictions of South Asian democracies, the zero-sum nature of the political competition in this country, his presumed "understanding" with the leadership of the democratic opposition the United National Party (UNP), the destabilising potential inherent in the political rise of the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the ideological spread of the Sihala New Right, the mounting strains and stresses on the Sri Lanka economy, and favourable currents and potentialities in the external environment will all converge to make victory possible. A slow motion collapse, implosive breakdown, or structural paralysis of the system will make it possible to hack away the grip of the Sri Lankan state upon his land Tamil Eelam. He has only to keep pushing and pounding, piling on the pressure at whatever cost to his troops and his nation.

An appropriate phrase for it would be "it's also the economy, stupid!" The system has many strains and stress-points, several sources of instability, amounting potentially to what the conflict theorists call 'multiple dysfunctions.' The situation is seeded with explosives like an LTTE base in Alampil is with claymores. While the United National Party-Tamil United Liberation Front-Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation, opposition is defeatist and capitulationist at best and collaborationist at worst, while the People's Alliance-Eelam People's Democratic Party-National Unity Alliance coalition is the broadest bloc of Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim centrist opinion and is the 'really existing' Popular Front, mounting economic hardship combined with a perception of a privileged, parasitic political class could erode popular support for the war—it's objectively anti-fascist character notwithstanding. Economic pressure on the masses and middle-class living standards, spreading disaffection over unshared sacrifice, disgruntlement about deteriorating public services, the growing feeling of administrative stasis and developmental gridlock, the halted elevator of upward social mobility, the myriad frustrations of everyday life: all these amplified by a strongly placed opposition including the stridently activist JVP, could catalyse a chain reaction leading to de-stabilisation, even breakdown. That would be Prabhakaran's window of historic opportunity.

The top brass of the Sri Lankan armed forces know that the LTTE is fighting to debilitate, destroy and evict his enemy. Therefore they know that the army has to be motivated to fight on—in order to prevent, and whenever possible, pre-empt him. That is why they cannot give up either. The issues are fundamentally important. They include, survival, safety, and basic instinct. What charms can peace possibly have for Prabhakaran and the Tigers, unless it's a peace coupled with victory—either by war or negotiations? Peace short of victory is for the Gerry Adamses and Yasser Arafats of this world, and the day he decided to take on the IPKF, Prabhakaran had classed himself in a far higher league. The only payoff for having graduated to the title of the world's deadliest guerrilla movement is Tamil Eelam, and even then there will always be war, there will always have to be war; war with the Sinhalese neighbour and whoever else, in order to retain the title. It is a question of nationhood, sovereignty, independence, destiny, glory, historic mission. That is why he will fight on till victory or death and he hopes the armed struggle would have been rendered irreversible if he dies before victory.

It is really not difficult to understand but I may be wrong there. If you are a tame academic or conventional soldier, sharp lawyer or slick businessman, feminist yuppie or software merchant, NGO proprietor or humanitarian volunteer—and who is not one of these species, these days?—these values must seem crazily wasteful; sacrifices made for them, crazier still. If they had heard of Prometheus (and the better educated ones would have) they would remember only the more fearsome episodes of his record of violence, and shudder, quickly changing the subject to one of cozier intimacy and trivial topicality. Let us not get carried away, though. The man (Prabhakaran, not Prometheus) is a fascist, as is his army. They butcher sleeping babes and bleed captives to a cold drawn-out death. But to resist him you need to anticipate him and to anticipate him you must 'read' and understand him and to understand him you must have dreamed utopias and mainlined master ideologies with meta-narratives, "risked one's skin to prove one's platitudes" (Ché), been through ' Sturm und Drang' while living for causes, shouldered historic projects in Sisyphean labour and experienced the pain of paying prices that keep escalating eternally in some uncontrollable (or cosmically controlled) inflationary spiral. Prabhakaran is not a soldier; he's a fighter and a warrior, a political combatant and a strategic thinker. Between soldier and fighter there is a difference. Few of today's and almost none of tomorrow's Sri Lankans will know what it is like. It was no old fashioned nostalgic fan of Marxism, but the post-modernist/post-structuralist social theorist Jean Baudrillard who made the philosophical point best:

Human rights, dissidence, antiracism, SOS-this, SOS-that: these are soft, easy, post coitum historicum ideologies, 'after the orgy' ideologies for an easy going generation which has known neither hard ideologies nor radical philosophies. The ideology of a generation which is neo-sentimental in its politics too, which has rediscovered altruism, conviviality, international charity and the individual bleeding heart. Emotional outpourings, solidarity, cosmopolitan emotiveness, multi-media pathos: all soft values harshly condemned by the Nietzschean, Marxo-Freudian age.... A new generation, that of the spoilt children of the crisis, whereas the preceding one was that of the accursed children of history.⁴

Prabhakaran's Tigers are the Spartans of South Asia, and the Sri Lankan Sinhalese are hardly the Athenians, which he knows and which is why he keeps fighting to win. But the Sinhalese have the numbers and contrary to what the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) says, a functioning, highly competitive democracy as well, which is why no elected government can allow the war to be lost on its watch. That is why the southern side will keep fighting. And then there are the proliferating vectors of ethnic conflict. On Bindunuwewa, neither the government nor the opposition, neither the state media nor the crusading investigative journalists, have followed the trail of blood and dug deep enough to uncover the identity of the actual perpetrators of this witches' Sabbath. The hideous shrieks of ethnic exorcism over, all you hear are the sounds of Sinhalese silence. Bindunuwewa and the subsequent killings by shooting of hill-country Tamil youth in the upheaval that followed, are sufficient to augment the LTTE's global inflow of funds and create recruits for Prabhakaran; vengeance-seeking suicide bombers or simply 'mules'—couriers—from the plantations who will bring the explosives into Colombo or some Sinhalese town; perhaps a few safe houses in the homes of that segment of the Tamil community that had so far resisted the siren song of separatist terrorism. Then will come the inevitable and necessary round-ups by the security apparatus, which will deepen the resentment. Perhaps Prabhakaran will finally be successful in opening up a new front, in the hills. Similarly, the burning humiliation of being, or seeing, or knowing of Sinhalese refugees sheltered in Buddhist temples in the high core of the island, imparting a feeling of the border drawing far down and inward, is sufficient to darken Sinhalese hatred and paranoia. With this dual spiral movement—ascending in violence, descending in sanity—why should either side stop fighting, and how can they?

Finally there are the deepest existential reasons, buried in the collective subconscious of each community, that cause the conflict to be structurally intractable. Sinhalese-Buddhism is the 'integral'

identity that has historically prevented the island from being overwhelmed or absorbed, swallowed, by the vastness to the north. Thus the social contract here is one in which society expects the state to safeguard and represent that identity. Any real attempt by the state to liberate itself from that majoritarian sense of collective being and the social contract will be considered to have been violated, threatened or abrogated: one has only to recall the crazed carnage of 1987-89. The challenge for the enlightened Sri Lankan leader is to know the extent to which the state can be autonomised from—not made independent of—that social ideology, while gradually expanding the area of autonomy through (neo-Gramscian) molecular manoeuvre. But will that be enough, and happen soon enough, for enough of the Tamils?

Simultaneously, symmetrically, for the Tamils, however many Chavakachcheris are pounded into rubble or children disappear into the 'Red Blossomed Gardens,' their ethnic 'name' and persona are made more famous by the day; to be a Tamil means an expanding empire of recognition, from Washington to Wellington. For a small ethnic community spread the world over, with such a rich cultural and linguistic heritage and individual modern achievement, pride counts more than for many. By the awesome annihilationist impact of their force and ferocity, and in the global acknowledgement of their mastery of death, Prabhakaran's Tigers have become the most powerful symbol and source of Tamil pride, of Tamilness today. "They shoot, therefore we are." Let us grant the man that.

This may be a bit of an odd thing to say, but Prabhakaran is not a militarist. At least not in the sense that his Sri Lankan critics, Sinhalese and Tamil, and mostly academic, seem to think. They imply that the man is congenitally predisposed to mayhem due to some learning disability which renders him uninterested in manifestos, programmes, seminars, embassy gatherings and visiting foreign scholars. To them, politics concerns itself with subjects like 'de-ethnicising the political imagination' and 're-imagining the state' and they cannot imagine Prabhakaran contributing constructively to the discussion. This academic view is mirrored by that of our parliamentarians who consider Prabhakaran an incorrigible militarist since their notion of politics is restricted to holding rallies, pasting posters, stuffing ballot boxes and getting the odd rival knocked off. Given my own nodding acquaintance with the theory and practice of politics, I consider the man to be certainly the best political mind on this island and possibly in South Asia as a whole.

He has a sure grasp of what is fundamental in politics: the state and state power. His project, far from being militarist, is classically political, namely the setting up of a new sovereign state, that of Tamil Eelam. To do that he has to oppose, resist and defeat the existing state power in the geographic terrain in which he hopes to set up his new state. That existent state power is that of the Sri Lankan state. He has set out to achieve this eminently political objective by military means, by warfare. These means sub-serve the political end. His elimination of rivals, which one could argue, weakened his political project, was probably undertaken because in his own mind, such competitive pluralism, even in the circumscribed turns of a united front, would dilute or slow down the achievement of the political goal. He does not have the time for consensus building; only for the consensus that he creates. That is not militarism, it is politics—albeit of a particular kind. It is totalitarianism, or fascism.

Prabhakaran heads an army, not a party. It is not an army led by a party (the Maoist and Vietnamese models), nor is it a politico-military vanguard organisation like the Sandinistas. But there is a unitary politico-military leadership, and that is Velupillai Prabhakaran. Leaders of armies have wrought immense political changes in world history and they cannot be simply written off as militarist—take Genghis Khan, as an example. What this means is that Prabhakaran's political mode is that of the closed system, perhaps definable as primitive in that it is despotic, pre-democratic, the politics of conquest, annexation, tyranny; the politics of the predator.

If the identification and handling of contradictions is the very stuff of politics, then nobody does it better in the region than Prabhakaran. He has understood and manipulated the weaknesses of two

democracies, Sri Lanka and India. He has established a permanent base among the Dravidian nationalists of Tamil Nadu, but has carefully regulated their level of rhetoric, from a high during the anti-Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) war, to a low burn today which does not ring any fire alarms in Delhi. The notion of a pan-Tamil Greater Eelam is not on display and is a psychological narcotic which is distributed only very selectively and with the greatest clandestinity. His manipulation of the contradictions between the various components of the Indian power bloc (South Bloc, Prime Minister's Office, Research and Analysis Wing, Intelligence Bureau) and even within each of these institutions, during the anti-accord war, wrote the textbook on such campaigns (which go way beyond lobbying). An array of Sri Lankan and Indian political leaders (M G Ramachandran, Rajiv Gandhi, R Premadasa, Lalith Athulathmudali, Gamini Dissanayake, Chandrika Kumaratunga) were each manipulated and manoeuvred in their turn. To be fair by the man, it is not always his proxies who go ringing the doorbells. Many a democratic politician or his representative has beaten a path to the Tiger's lair, hoping for a favourable response, even an intervention. Take for instance the Ranil-Prabhakaran equation, the operation of which during the presidential election campaign is sketched in outline in the recent report of the University Teachers for Human Rights, Jaffna.⁵

It is probable that Prabhakaran has, a sure sense of the fissiparousness, centrifugalism and plain venality of Sinhalese society, as well as the corresponding weaknesses of the Indian polity. Bill Clinton did not make a single adverse remark about the LTTE on his visit to the subcontinent. No journalist provoked and no official prompted him to. This means either that Prabhakaran's people are doing skilful political work far afield in the Western democracies or that, at the very least, they are doing better political work than their enemy/target state is. Not bad for a 'pure militarist' and 'individual terrorist' without 'any political programme.' Suffice to recall though that this was precisely Mussolini's and Hitler's achievements through the 1930s and early 1940s which prevented the formation of an anti-fascist united front in Italy and Germany, permitted Spain to be raped without any Western intervention, frustrated Litvinov's crusade for collective security and was epitomised in the 'spirit of Munich.'

There is a dimension though, in which Prabhakaran is a militarist, but that is not in the crass sense that his critics mean. He is a militarist in that his struggle lacks the panoply of under-girding political structures and practices that distinguish a true people's war of national liberation (China, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, Eritrea). He is not a Mao, Tito, Ho Chi Minh or Fidel Castro, and if he fails, this reason will be at the root of it all. It is possible that Tamil culture cannot produce or sustain one such—or even an approximation. It is also possible that one need not go to all that trouble to defeat the Sinhalese.

Ironically, it is not Westernised academia or the liberal-Left that understands Prabhakaran as other than a simple militarist. It is the Sinhalese chauvinist lobby. They understand that he is engaged in a profoundly political project which is a continuation of Tamil nationalist politics of decades. But they have flattened the differences and obfuscated the specificities. To them, Prabhakaran is an avatar of Chelvanayakam who is an avatar of Ponnambalam Ramanathan who is a descendant of Elara, Sena and Guttika. One Tiger is like another horse trader. This view of linear continuities where in fact there are leaps, breaks and qualitative changes in history, has resulted in the Sinhalese hard-liners (including the academics) expending more powder and shot on Chelvanayakam and Thondaman than on Prabhakaran. These Sinhalese extremists are fighting over school textbooks, and are busy driving stakes into the hearts of Prabhakaran's 'uncles, grandfathers and grand uncles'—as the title of one Sinhala tract goes—in exercises in ideological ethnic cleansing. They prefer to take on enemies their own size, preferably inanimate (like textbooks); and if animate, unarmed (like the kid on the Bambalapitiya train).

They miss the vital specificity of Prabhakaran's project i.e. its politico-military character. They also miss the specificity of his politics: i.e. its totalitarian/fascist character. By missing the former, they

overlook the gravity of the danger that Prabhakaran poses to the Sri Lankan state. Going by their logic, he is, qualitatively speaking, no more dangerous than Ponnambalam Ramanathan. And to those rational people here and in the world community who do not believe that Ramanathan, Chelvanayakam or Thondaman were dangers to the state, the listing of Prabhakaran in the same indictment, almost in the same breath, only exonerates the latter. By blurring the radical specificity of Prabhakaran's politics i.e. its totalitarian/fascist nature, the Sinhalese ideologues blur the threat that he poses to society and to democracy. It also divests the anti-Tiger cause of its most efficacious weapons, specially in the arena of world opinion: anti-totalitarianism, pro-democracy. Thus do the Sinhalese chauvinist ideologues weaken the cause of the anti-LTTE struggle. Illiterate in international politics (as are their left-liberal opponents), they identify with Vladimir Putin, when their counterpart is in fact Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the chauvinist and anti-Semite, who received under 3% of the vote. Putin's was a 'state patriotism,' a neo-Hegelian 'statolatory,' which had as its ally, an armed Chechen contingent. In their racist confusion, the Sinhalese zealots dislike and fear Douglas Devananda, whose authentic anti-LTTE credentials it would take them several lifetimes to amass, as much as they do Velupillai Prabhakaran.

As I had occasion to insist, at an ICES (Colombo) workshop conducted by Prof Michael Ignatieff, the only viable strategy in relation to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict is a triune one; simultaneously 'politico-military-diplomatic.' The People's Alliance government has all three tracks running but has them tangled up in a cat's cradle of crossed wires. The correct application would be one of a military-diplomatic approach to the Tigers and a political approach to the Tamil ethnic problem. By 'military' I do not mean "putting pressure on the LTTE so as to drive it to the negotiating table." Responding to Prof Ignatieff who advocated this approach on the basis that it had been necessary and successful in the case of the Bosnian Serbs, I pointed out that nasty lot though they were, both the Bosnian Serbs as well as their patron Serbia under Milosevic, had multiparty parliaments, while Prabhakaran has no such structural constraints and compulsions and is more implacable. Therefore, by 'military' I mean 'total' or 'absolute war' (Clausewitz's phrase) minus national conscription, however. Such an all-out war would have as its primary objective, the "annihilation of the living forces of the enemy" (Giap) rather than territorial acquisition. By 'diplomatic' I mean encircling the Tiger globally and actively securing the maximum external military assistance in the minimum time. By 'political' I mean negotiations strictly with the non-LTTE Tamil organisations for extensive devolution making for regional autonomy but falling short of federalism (which would be centrifugal). The triadic politico-military-diplomatic strategy is not an original submission, though its provenance is usually forgotten or is unknown to younger scholars. It is the formulation coined and the approach adopted by the Vietnamese leaders in their war with the world's mightiest power.

The purloined letter was on the mantelpiece, hidden in plain sight, in Edgar Allen Poe's classic tale. Things remain hidden sometimes not only because the obvious place is the last one to look for it, but because there is in operation some mental device which prevents the recognition and acknowledgement of what is—Simon & Garfunkel said it best when they sang that "a man hears what he wants to hear/and disregards the rest" (The Boxer). So too a society. Which is why the long discredited Practical Criticism "words on the page" approach in literary theory has something to recommend it. Consider Prabhakaran's 1999 birthday speech. For a society that has at last grown to take him seriously, we paradoxically refuse to take him seriously at all in the most important matters. His birthday message contains a message which everyone is overlooking, though it is there in the plainest English possible: "Years ago, our people made a decision that an independent state of Tamil Eelam is the only and final solution to our national conflict." Politicians, intellectuals and diplomats simply must memorise this. It will save so much time and grief. Mind you, he said this at Sudumalai in 1987, but the Indians thought it was a rhetorical gesture. He says this every year on his birthday, but our governing and chattering classes are such slow learners.

Ginger bearded Alasdair McDermott was the political officer (if that was all he was) of the British High Commission in Colombo in the mid-1980s and was one of the sharpest Western diplomats

to observe the Sri Lankan crisis up close and personal. At lunch at the Colombo Swimming Club one day, he confessed to me that he never could quite understand the plaintive query of his intelligent Sinhalese friends. "Now, what do you think this fellow Prabhakaran really wants?" "I tell them that I thought that was obvious: he wants that bit on top over there," a bewildered McDermott would say. It was in Lucerne, Switzerland, at the 10th⁶ Anniversary symposium on the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord organised by International Alert's Kumar Rupesinghe, that I discovered to my horror that over a dozen years and lagoons of life-blood later, the Sri Lankan policy elite still did not get it. Nursing an orange juice at teatime, a former Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary and influential senior diplomat, having kicked off his shoes, posed the following, in utmost sincerity to an incredulous assortment of sophisticated LTTE sympathisers and Indian opinion makers: "I say, you boys must be having a lot of contacts with these LTTE chaps. Can't you all discreetly find out what it is they really want?" I gazed fixedly at Lake Lucerne through the plate glass window, in shame. It is not simple stupidity, I think in my more charitable moments, but the obtuseness that comes from judging others by one's own unimaginative standards. This syndrome is not one of sheer bureaucratic sclerosis. That much was proved by the pathetic cock-up in evaluation by Chandrika Kumaratunga's 'new brooms,'⁷ the civil society intellectuals who had walk-on parts in the amateur theatrics of the 1994-95 peace initiative.

So Prabhakaran may have to belabour the same basic point for some years to come. The operative word in that key sentence in his closing heroes' week-cum-birthday statement for this century is 'only.' As in 'only and final.' Antonio Gramsci would term this 'maximalism.' If Tamil Eelam, defined clearly and unambiguously as 'an independent state,' is the 'only' solution, and this has been 'decided' a long time back, what then is there to negotiate? Tamil Eelam is an axiom, thus non-negotiable. His commitment to it is absolute, fundamental. No alternatives are admitted of as possibilities. Philosophical and psychological closure has been effected from the outset. The mind-set is hermetically sealed; the contradiction is antagonistic, the game, zero-sum. Therefore "the only thing there is to be negotiated are the borders of Tamil Eelam" as Balasingham⁸ *annai* said so memorably over a decade and a half ago. Only the modalities of secession are up for genuine discussion. The talks, the negotiations, the third party mediation, the path of peace that Prabhakaran mentions in his speech is just the small change—to buy time, to neutralise opinion, to divide and deceive the enemy, to secure the withdrawal of troops, among other measures.

Just as one man's terrorist is another man's liberation fighter, one man's—or nation's—solution can be another man's or nation's problem. Let us avoid therefore the debates as to whether or not the Tamils constitute a nation; whether the right of self-determination is a valid one that should be universally recognised; whether it applies in this case; whether it should be applied with modifications and what they should be. All these are old theological debates which should not be allowed to consume more time and printer's ink. What matters is that the Tamils, or sufficient numbers of them, perceive themselves to be a nation, and have thrown up a vanguard force which acts effectively on that perception i.e. killing and dying for the cause of an independent state. Does the LTTE represent a majority of the Tamil people? Who knows, how is one to tell and what does it really matter? At one point the Nazis did represent the German nation as the Japanese militarists did theirs and Mussolini his, but no special privileges derived from that fact as far as the Allied attitudes were concerned.

The question that has to be squarely faced is this: *Why not just give Prabhakaran what he is asking for quite so insistently?* Why not grant him his birthday wish? Why not follow the great Liberal, Gladstone's advice concerning Home Rule in Ireland, urged upon us many years ago by Ronnie de Mel⁹ and "concede with grace what we cannot hold with authority"? What's wrong in ceding Tamil Eelam, walking away from it all and spending our time rebuilding the economy?

Someday, war weariness could make society submit to this siren song of surrender. The problem is that the trade-off is not going to work. Colombo cannot trade Tamil Eelam i.e. the North and East, for peace, because even if such a Faustian bargain is struck, peace will not be the result. The

Sri Lanka state will not be able to withdraw into its southern cocoon and live in tranquil prosperity. The country will neither have the North-East nor peace.

Ernest Gold did the haunting soundtrack for the movie *Exodus*, starring Paul Newman and Eva Marie Saint. Prabhakaran loved the book. D B S Jeyaraj relates the tale in his version of the portrait of the separatist leader as a young man, penned as a birthday tribute. What Jeyaraj does not add is something he can check with *iyekkam* oldsters (such as the Nithyanandans), namely that *Mein Kampf* is also on Prabhakaran's short list of favourite texts. Be that as it may, the key lies in the latter's deep identification with the Zionist experience and achievement. What must also be borne in mind is that Prabhakaran's nationalism is far from the mainstream Zionism of the Haganah and the Palmach; of Ben Gurion, Moshe Dayan, Abba Eban and Yitzchak Rabin; of the Kibbutz and Histadrut—an enlightened cosmopolitan, intellectual, social democratic construct which was romantic and heroic even while it was expansionist and annexationist. His is the equivalent of the other Zionism, that of the Irgun Zvai Leumi and the Stern Gang; of Jabotinsky, Menahem Begin, Yitzchak Shamir and Ariel Sharon; of the massacres at Deir Yassin and Sabra and Shattila. Respected Jewish and Palestinian intellectuals have indicted that Zionism as flecked with fascism. Appalling as real history was, how much worse would the Arab and Palestinian experience have been if, from 1948 on, Israel had been led by the latter variety of Zionist? When it was, the Lebanese invasion took place and the massacres of women and children in the refugee camps.

The ruthless extermination of unarmed Tamil democrats and dissidents like Rajani Thiraganama¹⁰ and Neelan Tiruchelvam¹¹ (with many others in between) are evidence that Prabhakaran's Tamil Eelam would not only be militaristic and aggressively annexationist, but also an iron fisted totalitarian dictatorship. John F Burns, who shared the 1993 Pulitzer Prize with Roy Gutman for his exposure of Serb massacres in Sarajevo, is no softie and can spot evil when he sees it. In 1995, he described Velupillai Prabhakaran in the *New York Times* as the Pol Pot of South Asia. An Israel minus its vibrant internal democracy—a Tamil Sparta—in part of this island can only place the rest of it in permanent jeopardy and introduce a seriously destabilising factor into the region as well. An independent state of Tamil Eelam could legitimately secure any kind of weaponry it wished to and build up one of the strongest fighting forces in the region, thus upsetting the entire power balance and strategic environment. The geo-strategic salience of Trincomalee, which will fall within Eelam, will endow a Tamil Sparta with a military and economic value of extra-regional significance, again a seriously destabilising prospect.

As for the Sinhalese-majority areas, Prabhakaran will ignite border wars whenever he wants. He will annexe Sinhalese territories on the grounds that they are actually ancient Tamil territories or because the tiny state of Tamil Eelam needs 'defensible borders.' He will strike deep into the other provinces whenever he feels sufficiently provoked by the status of Tamils in those areas and is moved by pleas for help by his brethren. Such cries for solidarity could be contrived not only in the east or Colombo, but the hill-country as well. (Suffice to recall that the outbreak of war in 1990 was supposedly triggered by an incident involving a tailor. He will expand his state because he needs *lebensraum* or because he wants to go down as the greatest Tamil leader ever, which may mean the Tamil leader who ruled over the greatest area of Sinhalese territory. Or he may do so to blood his braves and keep his army in trim, or to test out new weapons, or to help the electoral prospects of this or that ally in Tamil Nadu, or to demote Balraj and promote Sornam, or because he has not done anything interesting for a while and feels bored. Or whatever. It is just what he does and who he is.

The Americans could retreat to the US from Vietnam, the French back to France from Algeria, the Portuguese from Angola, the Russians from Afghanistan. There is no ocean for the Sri Lankan forces to retreat beyond. And because Prabhakaran will be a nasty neighbour, the North-East is territory that the Lankan army will have to spill its blood in, all over again, even if it withdraws as part of a settlement. It had happened before resulting from the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and again after the

Premadasa-Mahattaya¹² talks. The military expenditure of the Sri Lankan state will not be reduced after the secession of the North-East, enabling it to concentrate on raising the living standards of its people. That is the lesson of history—the greatest hydraulic civilisation ever, abandoned, never to be reclaimed (until the British). Building tanks, dagobas and cultivating rice are necessary and noble things and one may even be very good at them, but the strategic environment determines the sustainability of such constructive enterprise. Over the millennia, the enemy kept coming over the horizon, striking across the Vanni, the border drawing downwards.

The need for protecting a long border against a superbly armed and trained foe who will have an eagerly adhered to policy of national conscription, will mean a colossal increase in defence expenditure. The resultant collapse of living standards would mean rebellion and dictatorship of the most ethnocentric and possibly praetorian sort. Border wars will be the permanent condition of existence. The Northern state will always have in its rear, a contiguous cultural area, namely a friendly, even admiring Tamil Nadu and beyond it the vast Hindu hinterland. The Southern state will have nothing at its back (unless one counts Antarctica). Finally—and most fundamental—there is the question of strategic 'defence in depth,' or the lack of it. Prabhakaran has already made incursions into Anuradhapura and Colombo. The more successful among his predecessors stayed for long stretches in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. An independent state of Tamil Eelam would have its own armoured corps, surface-to-surface missiles, navy and air force. There would not be a Sinhalese city or town, however far South, that is not within striking range of his air power and few hours reach of his tanks. That includes Colombo. The Southerners will live huddled, scurrying furtively in lengthening Northern shadows.

Thus if he is right and "an independent state of Tamil Eelam is the only solution," the conflict will be a protracted one, driven by a long war or a long series of wars and marked by the utter ubiquity of death—dark time, streaked crimson.

The periphery is the centre. The Mullaitivu jungles are the backwoods of Sri Lanka, bandit country, hardly integrated into the national economy. Yet the degree to which attention here and abroad was focussed on Prabhakaran's annual Heroes' Day *pronunciamento* indicated that in this scrub jungle was located the driving force of the island's destiny. One cannot readily bring to mind a Sri Lankan political personality whose policy speech was awaited with such keen interest and concern, locally and internationally. In their 'great debate' with the Soviet communists, the Maoists asserted that the 'storm centres' of world events were the armed national liberation struggles at the perimeter of the world system; the three continents of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In Sri Lanka for some time now, the 'storm centre'—though it suddenly and cataclysmically swerves South—has been the Tamil national question in the island's North East periphery. To borrow two terms from the old Leninist lexicon, there lies the 'weakest link' of the Sri Lankan system and therefore the 'key link' to be politically and conceptually grasped.

Being a realist rather than a cynic, I am not one of those whose response to Prabhakaran's message is what else is new? But being a realist rather than a facile utopian, neither am I one who glimpses in it a paradigm shift or strategic sea-change. There is certainly something new and that is rested in the extended length and denser weave of the text. Instead of the terseness and heroic prose poetry of earlier years, there is a greater political sophistication, greater nuance and studied ambiguity intended for multiple audiences, revealing a far higher degree of maturity. This is not a maturity which is conceived of an understanding of the unwinnability of the war, nor is it a maturity that will lead to such realisation. *What has matured in Prabhakaran is the comprehension that frontal assault alone will not do, that complex manoeuvres and feints are necessary not only in the military sphere (which he has practised for several years now) but even more, in the political and diplomatic spheres, so as to prepare the battleground for the final secessionist surges.* His statement is not a pathway to peace, but an elaborate feint and part of a

manoeuvre by which he hopes to outflank his enemy and reposition the LTTE better, for the continuation of the war until decisive victory.

Text and context. The text reveals a quintessential continuity in tactics. It is claimed that there are no preconditions for negotiations. There are however, issues that have been flagged as those the LTTE "insists" upon. Preconditions there may not be, but these issues will indubitably be hardened in to *conditions* once negotiations commence. The insistence that *the Sri Lankan state take the initiative* to de-escalate, normalise or create a conducive climate for talks is riddled with hypocrisy insofar as it was the LTTE which unilaterally commenced hostilities in 1995 against the present Sri Lankan administration, just as it did in mid-1990 against Premadasa and October 1987 (against the IPKF). Surely it is incumbent upon the aggressor to prove its *bona fides* by concrete initiatives? If the argument is that by virtue of the original sin of chauvinism, the Sinhalese side is permanently the aggressor, then what of the commencement, and, equally importantly, the continuance, of the war against the IPKF? Prabhakaran's speech follows the well-worn grooves of *the LTTE model of negotiations*, a model of shifting goalposts and time-buying for military purpose. *The immediate military purpose here is to delay the deployment of the full complement of Kfirs and the Indian built naval craft until weapons systems, to counter them can be procured by the 'KP'¹³ network and inducted safe from air strikes.* This needs time and a cease-fire, a breathing space.

Now the element of change. A close analysis of Prabhakaran's statement reveals that it is a response to two developments of basic import to him. No one changes tack in the face of victory, but they do when confronted with defeat. Prabhakaran has suffered two defeats and those two defeats have created a new context. What is new about his text is that it represents an attempt to respond to the new context, with its new challenges. To respond and surmount, not to accept and adjust. The man is attempting to continue his basic project (Tamil Eelam), through his chosen means (war), but having thought through and conceptually confronted the new adversities. The text itself yields an implicit recognition of the twin defeats (he would say setbacks) that have created the new conjuncture, the new situation with its correlation of forces, that he finds himself in. The first is military, or more correctly military-diplomatic, the second political.

The military defeat was in the attempt to take Jaffna. In November-December 2000, units of the Sri Lankan army cut and ran. The middle and upper-middle echelon officer cadre had a failure of nerve. Only a handful at the top functioned effectively. With the loss of Elephant Pass, the most intellectually sophisticated cabinet ministers were drawing parallels in private conversation, with the South Vietnamese army. Though obviously influenced by the 25th Anniversary of the liberation of Vietnam, the parallel was far from hyperbolic. The hard drive of the Sri Lankan state was in meltdown. What was perhaps most dangerous was that an in-built tendency of very old duration in Sinhalese history was being reactivated. That history showed two modes: the '*resist mode*' and the '*retreat mode*.' While the '*resist mode*' has been valiant and impressive, as Geoffrey Powell's *The Kandyan Wars*¹⁴ provides solidly impartial testimony of, the '*retreat mode*' is what makes certain areas of this island possess the longest uninterrupted colonial history (450 years) on the planet. After the last rebellion in 1848, there was a century of successful pacification, even when the colonial world was in violent upheaval after Japan's defeat of Russia in 1905, the Irish rebellion of 1916 and the October Revolution of 1917. One can hardly count the 1915 riot in Sri Lanka since that was more racist than resist.

'Unceasing Waves 2 and 3' had triggered the historical '*retreat mode*.' Three hundred foreign journalists camped out here, waiting for the end and its echoes: race riots in the South, UN refugee camps, humanitarian crisis, blue helmets in what they thought would be the new Kosovo, the next East Timor. For Sri Lanka, early in the 21st century and the 3rd millennium, it was a 'lose/lose' scenario. And then, as Joseph Heller wrote, 'something happened.' Public opinion rallied (or was re-flated), pressures from the societal environment built up, the competitive-partisan and anti-incumbency implications of defeat kicked in, the dangers of the ethnic dominoes falling in the South if beleaguered soldiers were massacred or humiliatingly withdrawn were realised, political will was resuscitated, the potentialities of the Sri Lankan state as a legitimate actor in the international system were recalled and

tapped into, external inputs of force multipliers which offset the domestic military hollowing-out were injected. The thing was turned around.

The Sri Lankan side—public, political class and intelligentsia—has forgotten this historic crisis and never thought to reflect upon it. The public needs no excuse since it is locked in ceaseless combat with the crushing pressures of material existence. Not so the other strata. One side will never forget it though, and has reflected upon the experience, learning some of the lessons. That is the LTTE as an entity and Velupillai Prabhakaran in particular. His Heroes Day message dictates the lesson he has learned. The international factor was miscalculated and underestimated by him. He had relied on a combination of the strong, globalised Tamil diaspora and the fuzzy ambivalence towards the LTTE on the part of conventional states—coincidence of factors which he thought sufficient to permit him to punch through to victory. That failed. He is now attempting to address that problem in the external theatre by neutralism, international opinion and creating at the least, divided counsel in a number of governments. It is an ambitious move, aimed not merely at pre-empting an international encirclement of the LTTE, but creating a counter-encirclement of the Sri Lankan state. His Heroes Day statement is the spearhead of that flanking manoeuvre. So far the Lankan side has been unable to come up with an analytical response, still less a countermove.

The second defeat that Prabhakaran is responding to is the political one: the creeping pacification and the reopening of electoral democratic space in the North-East. For a shade over half a decade, the twin spearheads of that process have been the Sri Lankan military and Douglas Devananda. The islands off Jaffna were liberated by the army during the tenure of President Premadasa. Devananda's intelligent manner of playing the few cards he held, enabled him to move in. That was the toehold. At the tail end of the UNP administration, in the elections of 1994, he secured a parliamentary fraction, which he held on to despite internal dissent. With this slice of real estate, he established an equation with President Kumaratunga, just as S Thondaman and Ashraff had done. From the point of view of the democratic system as a whole, the most valuable move he made was to contest the Jaffna municipal elections a few years back. Securing ten seats, the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) dug in politically and helped provide the citizenry with a modicum of normalcy in their everyday life. It is the combination of General Lionel P Balagalle's enlightened yet militarily effective running of Jaffna as commander of that zone and Devananda's contribution at the municipal level, that permitted some form of civic action safety net. That was a key factor in the failure of Prabhakaran's Jaffna offensive in that it forestalled any supportive response to the offensive from the people of Jaffna. It is the simple yet indispensable social service that Devananda's EPDP provided in Jaffna that won him four seats and as the astute, respected correspondent of *'The Hindu'* (formerly of the *Indian Express*) Nirupama Subramaniam explained to a seminar audience at the ICES Colombo, these were fairly earned, not rigged. (In fact at a pre-election luncheon she accurately predicted to me the EPDP's seat tally). Today, Lionel P Balagalle heads the army and Douglas Devananda represents "the Tamil quisling group" that "Chandrika has elevated to a high position in the North-East administration," in the words of Prabhakaran. In the statement there is a significant, unprecedented reference to the army commander. Despite a transparently divisive attempt to group them as hawks and doves—aimed mainly at an international audience—the LTTE's list of Most Wanted is written on the wall: Chandrika Kumaratunga, Lakshman Kadirgamar, Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, Douglas Devananda, Lionel Balagalle. The Tigers fear that a gradualist evolutionary-reformist option as represented by Devananda may, at last, take hold among the war-weary Tamil people, starting, from Jaffna and spreading outward like an oil-slick. A North-Eastern Thondaman would erode the war for Tamil Eelam, now that its momentum has been retarded by the military combination of Mig 27s, MBRLs, and Generals Balagalle and Wijendra. *Prabhakaran knows what almost no one else realises or acknowledges: that if the Tamil nation has a future other than him, it is or lies through, Douglas Devananda. This also means that if the country and the Sinhalese people have a way out, it is only if Devananda survives and succeeds.* Which is why a main aim of his Heroes' Day move is to outflank, isolate and throttle the Devananda option.

This young (forty something) leader is unique, an active anti-fascist political fighter; a constructive moderate who will militantly defend his programme from the Tigers; a Tamil democrat willing to swim against the tide of extreme Tamil nationalism and be branded a traitor throughout the Tamil diaspora; a brashly self-confident idealist with a strong sense of realism; a man who has made mistakes and may have sinned, but is not evil unlike who would destroy him; a strong man who has suffered, been wounded and scarred, but still struggles and strives is half-blind but has a vision for his people; an optimist with a gruff laugh who exists every moment in the shadow of sudden death. He is a tarnished knight in dented armour.

II

The Missing Pages of Prabhakaran's Message

"...thousands of human flames like a river of fire..."
- Velupillai Prabhakaran

Remember the battle waged in UN for and by the Non Aligned Movement, for a new international information order, to accompany a new international economic order? Younger readers would not—which is not their fault, and they would not even have heard of it, which would be their fault. One of the points made during this struggle is that countries of the Third World, including neighbouring ones, received their information about each other not by direct exchange but via the First World media. This meant delay and more importantly, distortion. If we are talking of information flows however, what are we to make of the fact that over a fortnight after he delivered his Heroes' Day speech of 2001, the translation of the full text did not appear in the English and Sinhala language Sri Lankan media? (I do not know whether it has in the Tamil). All of us have relied on the Tamilnet version which was first carried by the *Island*. This is ironic since Tamilnet has been criticised for its pro-LTTE bias. Yet no one thought to, or worse still, had the contacts and access to secure the original or a translation of it. The various political responses and the entire discussion and debate have taken place on the basis of the Tamilnet report. That tells us we need a New Domestic Information Order. It also tells us quite a bit about quite a few things around here: the media, the political class, the intelligentsia and above all, Sinhalese-Tamil communication i.e. relations.

It is not that the Tamilnet version is an outright distortion or falsification. However, it is partial, incomplete and therefore misleading. And what is missing is precisely the opening segment and the closing paragraph—two pages and a bit of A4 sized typescript. In other words, Prabhakaran's opening and closing remarks to his army and people and history, containing those things he thought most important, those he chose to accord priority to those that preceded and set the stage for and then rounded off everything else he said and therefore place every one of those things in a different light and contextual frame. Tamilnet doubtless had tactical reasons for this piece of editing. The international media would pick up the first English language version that came out and would go with it, not least because the Sri Lankan side did not have the full text in translation to disseminate as an alternative. The interpretation given by the Western media is what the Western officials and politicians would base themselves on. In turn at or around the aid group meeting, they would strive to commit, the Sri Lankan side to negotiations. The trap would be sprung—and Prabhakaran would secure the breather that he needs.

The full text invalidates nothing of my own analytical interpretation, which I like to regard as belonging to the 'realist' school, and indeed reinforces it greatly, though I had got it quite wrong when I said that "the heroic prose poetry" had been cut down. But let us permit Prabhakaran to speak for himself and the readers to judge for themselves. The exercise in exegesis can follow. First, the first page:

"... *Holy day ... we will open our souls on a holy day like this....*" This is a quasi-mystical, religious discourse; a discourse of religious ecstasy and devotion, quite unusual for a national liberation movement. Unless of course one is speaking of a movement propelled by religious fundamentalism. The LTTE is as close as one can get to a religious fundamentalism without actually being committed to a religious cause. In fact, its martial-ethnic ideology has been transformed into and internalised as a religion, and functions as such. Its tactical dexterity must not obscure the reality that this is a fundamentalist and fanatical ideology and collective mindset.

"Heroes are our guides in our journey towards freedom. Their lives and history are what make our goal firm. They are our guiding lights." Surely the 'freedom' and the 'goal' that is being talked about here and towards which the heroes are "our guiding lights" is of a qualitatively different order from the new Irish, Scottish and Welsh assemblies? The celebration of martyrdom and the kind of devotion adverted to here philosophically and psychologically precludes the abandonment of the struggle this side of the achievement of 'freedom.' *"Let us light the fire of ambition in our hearts on this holy day when we light the flames for our heroes and remember them."* That 'ambition' somehow does not strike me as being for federalism. This religiosity of these affirmations makes for and requires *absolutes*, maximum outcomes, a permanent revolution leading to the Promised Land. Only that could justify the holy sacrifices of the martyrs; anything else would be betrayal, sacrilege. There is only one goal that is adequate, commensurate, with the metaphysics of martyrdom: freedom i.e. Tamil Eelam.

From the words to the image. Any student of Nazism would recognise the hypnotic use of the flame, the torches. *"When I light the flame in the memory of our heroes, in these burning flames, in the unusual fire dance, I see a vision. Shining like the light, thousands of human flames like a river of fire, shedding light, and leading the way."* This could have come from a speech of Adolph Hitler at a torchlight parade in Nuremberg—the thousands of 'human flames' being Prabhakaran's original contribution, advertising to the self-immolation by the Black Tiger suicide bombers. It will take more than Erik Solheim, Peter Hain, the National Peace Alliance, the Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Sihala Urumaya and JVP to convince me that this 'river of fire' leads to full-blooded federalism. This passage is a far truer testimony of what Prabhakaran, the LTTE and the war are about, than anything we have had so far. This is more than a glimpse, this is hard, 'photographic' evidence: *Tamil Eelam/Third Reich*. But who will take it on board? The politicians? The intellectuals? The columnists? The diplomats?

The next one and a half pages of Prabhakaran's message contain a shift in tone and content, but not of a nature that the peaceniks think. It is a fascinating, masterly account of the military situation as it unfolded over the past year. That story which constitutes a crucial page in this island's long history, has been glossed over or buried by all quarters of the Sri Lankan polity and society for their different and divergent reasons. The government, because the true story shows just how bad things got and just how close we came on its watch, to a historic defeat. It was touch and go. The opposition, because it was hoping for a debacle which would sweep it into power, and because an authentic narrative would also show how the administration and particularly the president, rallied, a little late but still in time, to save the country from a historic catastrophe. The military, because the story is also one of retreat, meltdown and a myopia which prevented it from reading Prabhakaran's plan for a Dien Bien Phu at Elephant Pass until it was almost too late. The 'Sihala' racists and the JVP because the outcome showed that the democratic establishment was still capable of defending state and nation, (owing to an international legitimacy that would be forfeited if Southern extremists were in power). The peacefreaks because they would have to admit that Prabhakaran was striving for a military victory and that the Southern electorate rewarded the PA for thwarting that thrust forcefully and not as an incentive for peace talks. The mass media and the intelligentsia because 'civil society' here is carved up into sectors, each of which is proxy for, or takes its cue from, one or other of these quarters. So we never got the full story and never will. Certainly, the multiple initiatives and catalytic interventions that made the decisive fight back possible will always remain a hidden history, never to be told, always to be denied, soon to be forgotten.

Prabhakaran however, owes an explanation to his fighters, his nation here and in the diaspora, and to himself. He is compelled to put this page of history in perspective. Here is his story, the way he saw and experienced it, when it was down to the wire:

So Prabhakaran now sees his forces to be "at the doors of Jaffna," external military assistance having "compelled us to postpone our battle plans." However, "our liberation organisation will recapture Jaffna" ...Elephant Pass and other operations have "given us new vigour and strength." The fighters and the people's participation will "end the enemy's invasion and fulfil the goals of our freedom." The concluding paragraph of Prabhakaran's message, his bottom line, was edited out of the Tamilnet text (or the *Island* version) and is something that the Lankan public is unaware of. It reads:

"Our heroes who destroyed themselves in the flames of truth and ambition will guide us by becoming part of history. It is definite that we will reach our goal by following their noble path."

This is from the Tiger's mouth. For the LTTE as before and as always, negotiations are war by another means and are intermissions between wars. But have we got Prabhakaran's message?

Peter Hain was a minor hero of mine during adolescence, when as leader of the Young Liberals he pioneered and actively spearheaded the sports boycott of apartheid South Africa. (My major heroes were Ché and Giap, the middle-range ones included George Jackson and Muhammed Ali). Therefore, it was with considerable respect and regret that I crossed swords with him during question time at his important British Council lecture, running my usual risk of being regarded as an incorrigible middle-aged *enfant terrible* and professional party pooper. Peter Hain is, I fear, fundamentally and dangerously in error. His speech, interviews and other remarks contained three central points. The first is correct, the second unobjectionable and the third, dead wrong. Unfortunately, the third is the very point that Hain chose to underscore.

His first point was the possibility of extensive devolution within a unitary framework, as exemplified by the new arrangements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; their relevance to and desirability in the Sri Lankan context. A point well worth making and I wish he had fleshed it out more, hammered it home and stuck to just that. It may have silenced the purist unitarians and the fundamentalist federalists, helped break the log-jam in the striving for regional autonomy and provided the planks of a consensus on the matter between the two major democratic parties. Only those who sympathise with the JVP or Sihala Urumaya perspective could reject his pitch for the exciting new reforms of the British political structure. His second point was that the British government fully and unequivocally welcomes and supports the Norwegian initiative and stands ready, if requested, to assist in it. Fair enough, European solidarity, though he might wish to re-familiarise himself with Hannan Ashrawi's critique of the Oslo track in her autobiography, in the light of the latest carnage in the Middle East. This is not to echo the views of those Sri Lankan extremists who question the bona fides of the Norwegians, but to make the plainer point that with all the sincerity in the world, they can get it very wrong indeed. In fact, if one is going to have to get into that ballgame, then far better a hard-nosed, clear-sighted James Baker or George Mitchell than an Erik Solheim, who seems a little naive and starry eyed.

Hain's third point, the one he emphasised most strongly, is his weakest. That directly concerns the LTTE. Based on no particular evidence, and in the face of all evidence to the contrary, he describes the LTTE's objective as 'autonomy' as distinct, of course, from secession. On another occasion, he proclaimed the belief that the LTTE will seriously consider a plan for autonomy. A third variant is that while the Tigers will remain committed to the goal of independence, as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) does to a united Ireland, they may, as part of a negotiated settlement, relinquish the use of violence to obtain that goal. "Reading the tea leaves" he also guesses that the LTTE has realised that it cannot defeat the Sri Lankan state by force of arms and has therefore resiled from that aim, following a brief moment of hubris after the occupation of Elephant Pass. He draws a rough parallel between the

IRA and the LTTE—both guilty of terrorism and assassinations. He strongly urges that the Sri Lankan state follow the British example and negotiate with the Tigers, and insists with equal vehemence that there is no alternative to doing so. (Hain did deploy South Africa as an example of peaceful, negotiated conflict resolution, but dropped it, readily admitting that the Tigers and Prabhakaran were hardly an African National Congress (ANC) and a Nelson Mandela).

The central analogy, IRA-LTTE is plain wrong and in multiple senses. The IRA was a small terrorist group with a full-time activist hardcore and with a maximum of several hundred members. The LTTE is an army of many thousands. The IRA had begun to admit in its inner councils that it could not get the 'Brits Out' by warfare. That much was manifestly obvious when its guerrilla campaign sputtered away into sporadic acts of terrorism. Even at its peak, the Provos urban guerrilla war never went beyond the ambush of a squad of British troops and the rocketing of police stations. The archetypal Provo combatant figure and hero was the lone, balaclava-clad sniper with the Armalite M-16. There were no artillery wizards, anti-aircraft unit commanders, Black Sea Tiger squadron commanders. Had the IRA been capable of large-unit, mobile-conventional warfare operations like the LTTE's '*Ithayabhoomi*' ('Heartland') and '*Unceasing Waves 2 & 3*,' had it possessed anything like the 1,500 strong Black Tiger strategic reserve force, it would have fought on for at least the next quarter century, as would have the PLO!

Not even the Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), the powerful Salvadorean guerrillas, in their dramatic 1989 offensive which demonstrated the impossibility of militarily vanquishing them, possessed the heavy artillery and naval capability that the Tigers have. And in order for the FMLN to be convinced that a military victory was beyond their reach as well, the regime's ally, the US, had to covertly deploy out of the Panama Canal Zone, a package of one AWACS and two deadly 'Spectre' warplanes bristling with electronically driven cannon and multiple-barrelled Gatling guns—which put through a meat-grinder, any large-scale attacking formations of FMLN fighters, forcing them to revert to classic guerrilla columns. Give the Sri Lankan state the same package free of charge and let it be in use for six months—and maybe some Good Samaritan can then make the Tigers an offer of sincere negotiations they really cannot refuse.

The IRA, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), the FMLN, the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) of Guatemala and all other outfits that eventually entered the democratic mainstream, were all politico-military organisations, not military-political ones like the LTTE. They all had serious internal political structures, processes and dynamics (though hardly democratic and almost always ideological). Sinn Fein was a political entity which, as far back as the 1980s, entered the competitive electoral-democratic process, capitalising on the upsurge of popular support for the IRA cause after the deaths of Bobby Sands and the other hunger strikers. Though often opting to boycott the existing parliament, Gerry Adams was participating in authentic popular politics. Sinn Fein in Ireland and the other guerrilla organisations in Latin America were linked to a network of semi-autonomous people's organisations which eventually transmitted social sentiments of war-weariness and began to exert pressure through negative feedback, on the armed movements. Those movements were qualitatively more porous and permeable, and more dependent on the citizenry than the LTTE. Had the Tigers been similar, they would have not—and indeed been unable to—declare war on the IPKF, on Premadasa and on Chandrika Kumaratunga, at the time and the stage of the process that they did so. The LTTE *overrode* mass sentiment for giving peaceful reform a real chance and successfully sustained that belligerent posture. When in 1989-90 Prabhakaran belatedly launched a political wing, the People's Front of Liberation Tigers (PFLT), he dissolved it in less than a year, despite, or precisely because of its rapid growth among the Tamil masses of the North and East. Subsequently he incarcerated and executed its erstwhile leader, his own deputy, Mahattaya. What must be grasped is that the Tigers are a different species from the IRA, FMLN and PLO. They are a vanguard army, *totalitarian* in character; a *Juggernaut* or *Leviathan*. And Prabhakaran is one Tiger who cannot be tranquillised.

None of this means that he does not deploy the discourse of peace or that the LTTE will not negotiate. Conversely, the fact that these Tigers do talk does not invalidate the characterisation of them made here. The LTTE track record of negotiations from 1985, punctuated by Pearl Harbours and assassinations, provide empirical verification of their twinning of tactical flexibility with strategic implacability. Perhaps there is room for doubt, but not for reasonable doubt, concerning their essential nature. The LTTE's use of negotiations has a close parallel in the diplomatic manoeuvres and tactics of Adolph Hitler throughout the 1930s, most notably at Munich and in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. I do wish that Western governments would bring expert analysts into the loop before they undertake a demarche on subjects like the LTTE. I do not mean 'resource persons' mandatorily drawn from the pool of the politically correct; that proliferating network of experts on Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict who intersect and overlap with the 'peace studies and conflict resolution' conglomerates. I mean real 'expert witnesses,' specialists on phenomena such as the LTTE, axiomatically acknowledged as 'the main player.' One fails to understand why ministers Solheim, Hain *et.al.*, do not tap Paul Wilkinson, Bard E O'Neill, Yonah Alexander or best of all, the world's foremost authority and senior-most scholar of such movements, Prof Walter Laqueur. Laqueur was picked for the task because he had established his reputation in this field of study with several scholarly books. No one is better equipped intellectually, conceptually, than this grand old man of the subject of comparative political warfare, to comprehend a movement like the Tigers, this encyclopaedic mind that tells us in *The New Terrorism*¹⁵ that he finds no global and historical parallels for the sheer fanaticism of the LTTE outside of the European fascist movements of the 1930s. It is this oracular verdict, delivered with the weight of unmatched knowledge and scholarly research, and dovetailing perfectly with the bloody, cumulative experience of this country and India, that Western friends as well as learned locals want us to disregard or regard as of secondary importance. That is why my criticism of Erik Solheim and Peter Hain is not the crude 'anti-Western imperialist' indictment levelled by the JVP and Sihala Urumaya. It is that the duo (and their co-thinkers) are in fundamental diagnostic error when they equate (however roughly) a terrorist/guerrilla organisation, such as the IRA, with a Hitlerian guerrilla-terrorist military machine, the LTTE, thereby confusing the basic problem, which is not merely or primarily one of terrorism, but one of fascism. Furthermore, they sound like the wrong kind of Westerner, Neville Chamberlain.

If one can assassinate Nehru's grandson Rajiv Gandhi and not just get away with it, but have Western democracies beat a trail to your door thereby conferring legitimacy on you as a desirable peace partner, then you become a success story and role model. This is not only a question of ethics and morality, but very much a policy problem with truly global implications. What is the signal that is being sent out and the message that will be received? That the tactic of suicide bombings and assassinations, if persisted in over time, can wear down democracies to the point of negotiations, which in turn confer vital, de-facto recognition and legitimacy? This may not be a problem for Norway or Britain, but for India, Russia and the United States it should. Today's turmoil in the Middle East has produced a generation of combatants who in this information age, would be attracted to the LTTE model and irresistibly tempted to use the Tiger techniques against the US, its assets, its citizens, its interests and its allies. That can be deterred only if the LTTE example is turned on its head i.e. is turned into a negative example, transformed into a narrative concluding in defeat and failure. That would require a concert of democracies, not acting to pressurise the embattled and economically vulnerable Sri Lankans to negotiate, but recognising the indivisibility of democratic interests in the face of totalitarian terror, and expressing democratic solidarity, in its highest form: *cold steel*.

Our sense of victim-hood in the Third World may blind us to it, but globalisation is a two way street, that there are economic trade-offs and that we make gains for our pains. I mean that we are not entirely passive recipients of metropolitan imagery and influences. The global information system swings both ways. In the CNN era, an image or symbol from the remotest corner of the global South reaches both the metropolis and the other remotest corner. The periphery is no longer quite so

peripheral. This is why the outcome of the war in Sri Lanka's North should be regarded in the world's capitals as something more than an ugly little conflict in a pretty little place. This is why the world should give a damn.

At the moment it really does not matter who is responsible for the military debacle and when exactly the slide began. What does matter is the probable outcome and its possible fall-out, regionally and further afield. Right now, the war is being lost by the Sri Lankan state—and not only in the Kissingerian sense that "so long as the government is not winning it is losing and so long as the guerrillas are not losing they are winning." It is happening far more literally. Check out the map of the island: the LTTE zones of control are expanding while those of the Sri Lankan army are shrinking, and at accelerating rate. This has been the case since last November 1999. Worse still, the contiguity of the Sri Lankan army dispositions has been sundered for the most part. Part of the army is bottlenecked in the peninsula. It is only a matter of time before the Palaly runway is vulnerable to the LTTE's long guns. Supply and troop ships are bound to be targeted by the Sea Tigers. A segment of the Jaffna citizenry may help smuggle in LTTE commando teams. The battle for Jaffna may trigger a refugee exodus which will be used by Prabhakaran's allies across the straits, a fanatic in need is a fanatic indeed. In Jaffna, Prabhakaran enjoys the inestimable advantage of fighting on home turf. While he retains the option of opening up the Vavuniya and Eastern fronts and adding to his heavy weapons before moving on to Jaffna, it is more likely that he will use the 'high' that his fighters in the Peninsula are on, and just go for it. He is making up for manpower shortage with surprise, initiative, penetrative power, morale, mobility. That is, he is using the same shock tactics that Guderian's Panzers did in the Blitzkreig and the Israelis did in 1947, 1967 and 1973 (which they learnt originally from Orde Wingate). All these were derived from the concepts and doctrine of B H Liddell Hart in the 1920s and 1930s.

If he succeeds in breaking the back of the army, that is the second conventional army that myth and legend will have him victorious over—the first being of course the IPKF. He will be a hero in Tamil Nadu and will automatically strengthen or revive at North pan-Tamilian (perhaps even Pan-Dravidian) feeling. Every Tamil Nadu Tamilian will view him and herself differently and will look at North Indians differently. And in their gaze will be contained memories of a Tamil army, the LTTE, beating (in reality, fighting to a standstill) the North Indian led one. Soon, some youngster will try to emulate his hero Prabhakaran, possibly with a struggle for 'Enosis' (joining up, fusion) with Tamil Eelam. Today's MDMK will play the same role that the TULF, or more correctly, its more militant members unwittingly did *vis-à-vis* the Tigers. Delhi may regret the day it ruled out the only option that could have made things turn out differently and have saved Rajiv too: a joint IPKF-Sri Lanka army (SLA) offensive against the Tigers. Today the only way to prevent a psychological domino effect by cultural osmosis, of an LTTE victory on India's future, may be to restore the credibility of the Indian armed forces' combat capability in relation to the Tamil Tigers. Once again, the only way to achieve this effect would be to exercise the solitary option that Delhi and Colombo have never tried: a joint military offensive. If this were Central America or Mexico, the US would not have waited for the native establishment to get its act together and seek assistance; the offer of assistance would come from Washington along with the insistence that the situation is intolerably out of hand and the regime in question crack down on the insurgency in question due to its possible spill-over effects across the border. The US was never as vulnerable to anything south of the Rio Grande as India would be to a Prabhakaran victory, but when it comes to strategic analysis and conceptualisation Delhi's policy makers and governing elite are just not in the Washington class, are they?

A Tiger victory over a fairly large, fairly adequately endowed force like the Sri Lanka army, will act as a tremendous source of inspiration for every rebellious group in the South Asian region—in the first instance and at the very least. Prabhakaran will be the hero and role model, the LTTE the example. Nothing is more contagious than the force of example. In this Information Age, the news and, more important, the images, will speed to every corner of the globe. The iniquitous downside of

neo-liberal economic globalisation has deposited sufficient fissile material in societies all over, including in some of the most surprising places. Meanwhile the end of the cold war has removed the constraints on open ethnic fissure. Varieties of cultural and religious fundamentalist militancy have also proliferated as a backlash against rapid modernisation. There is a vacuum of secular-universalist ideologies, and accompanying role models, with mobilisational capacity. Prabhakaran's achievement is not as obtrusively culturally-bound and therefore as specific as that of Hamas or the Hezbollah. It is more widely transmittable, absorbable and may thus be perceived as more replicable than those others. The LTTE is also far more of a success story than the secular radical movements still in business such as Mexico's Zapatistas and Columbia's Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and Peru's Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN). While romantics and the more intellectually minded may prefer to emulate the Zapatistas, the rougher, tougher and generally meaner elements world-wide would find the Tamil Tigers a more compelling model and mode. Ché has been a long time gone, mine is the last generation that Fidel is a hero for, Tomas Borge's into the long green, Ho Chi Minh the kids have not heard of, Manny Marulanda is like real old, and subcommandante Marcos—well, Oliver Stone's been there done that. Prabhakaran: now there is a natural born killer. In this world of neo-liberal values, he is a real success story, unscathed by the bonfire of the vanities. Even Darth Vader and Bill Gates got taken down, but not Prabhakaran. He is American Psycho and Hannibal 'the Cannibal' Lecter rolled into one, only he is bigger and he is for real.

The end of the cold war produced two famous conceptual essays, Francis Fukuyama's 'The End of History,' a brilliant and erudite neo-Hegelian consideration (by way of Kojève) first published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and Prof. Samuel Huntington's piece on 'The Clash of Civilisations,' originally in the *Foreign Affairs Quarterly*. Lesser known but perhaps more relevant and even more prophetic is a typically lucid essay by the distinguished diplomatic historian and specialist on the cold war, John Lewis Gaddis—also writing in the *Foreign Affairs*¹⁶ Quarterly (Spring, 1991). Gaddis's thesis is best expressed in his own words, even at some length:

...Another form of competition has been emerging that could be just as stark and just as pervasive as was the rivalry between democracy and totalitarianism at the height of the cold war; it is the contest between forces of integration and fragmentation in the contemporary international environment ... There are forces of fragmentation at work that are resurrecting old barriers between nations and peoples—and creating new ones—even as others are tumbling.... The problems we will confront in the post cold war world are more likely to arise from competing processes—integration versus fragmentation—than from the competing ideological visions that dominated the Cold War.... Fragmentationist forces have been around much longer than integrationist forces and now that the cold war is over, they may grow stronger than at any point in the last half a century. The forces of fragmentation lurk just beneath the surface, and it would take little encouragement for them to reassert themselves, with all the dangers historical experience suggests would accompany such a development. We need to maintain a healthy scepticism about integration; there is no need to turn into some kind of sacred cow. But we also need to balance that scepticism with a keen sense of how unhealthy fragmentationist forces can be if allowed free rein.¹⁷

Velupillai Prabhakaran is the world's prime exponent of fragmentation and ethnic war. The Tigers are the most successful vanguard organisation of the forces of fragmentation. If John Lewis Gaddis's thesis is correct, then future historians will identify Prabhakaran as the father of fragmentation in the 21st century and Sri Lanka as the disease vector from which the bacillus of fragmentation spread. Eric Hobsbawm called the 20th century the age of extremes. I tend to see it more as the age of ideology. A retrospective of that century would reveal the defining importance of the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. World War II was the apocalyptic clash of ideologies—Fascism versus Democracy (and its radical socio-economic variant, socialism). It had a precursor and prototype: Spain, the struggle of the fascists against the democratic republic. The Western democracies did not recognise it as such (and the only ones who did, the Communists, hardly had the most credible democratic credentials). Humanity was to pay for this astigmatism. The Sri Lankan state is a small, multiparty, functioning if flawed democratic republic, with a market economy, a measure of provincial

autonomy for an ethnic minority and an ongoing bipartisan dialogue to upgrade that autonomy to regional self-rule. It is embattled by an irregular army which seeks to carve an ethnic state and which has repeatedly revealed its terrorist, totalitarian, and even Fascistic character. It is an army whose fighters admit to the foreign press (France's *Le Monde*) that in macabre transfusions, captive Sri Lankan soldiers are drained of blood until they die. If this is not fascism—and of a particularly vampiric, demonic sort—what is?

If Prof Gaddis is right, then this war may be both symptom and prototype of the newly emergent global tendency of fragmentation. And it is that struggle, between the forces of integration and fragmentation, that is the defining historical trend, just as the grand ideological contest was in the century past. If so, Sri Lanka plays the same historical role that Spain played in the last century—and most so for the South Asian region. In the case of Pol Pot the world had the excuse that it did not know what he was capable of until after he had won. Prabhakaran has been a model of transparency, though. Nobody, however, seems to see what is going down and probably will not until its way too late, with the Ebola virus of successful armed ethnic secession having been released into the atmosphere.

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Notes

- 1 Boston Teran, *God is a Bullet*, Pan Macmillan, 2000.
- 2 On 24 October 2000 a local mob attacked a small rehabilitation centre for Tamil youths who had moved away from the ranks of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and surrendered to the army or the police. About 25 persons were killed in this occasion.
- 3 A bazaar town in the plantation areas in the Nuwara Eliya district, at which clashes occurred between the plantation population and Sinhalese residents on 28 October 2000, clashes which erupted in the wake of the Bindunuwewa incident.
- 4 Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories*, London, Verso, 1990, pp 223-24.
- 5 *The Island*, 31 January, 4 February 2001.
- 6 Kumar Rupesinghe (ed), *Negotiating Peace in Sri Lanka: Efforts, Failures and Lessons*, Sri Lanka, International Alert of London, UK, 1998.
- 7 The reference is to the government delegation for the first set of discussions which included K Balapatabendi, secretary to the prime minister at that stage Chandrika Kumaratunga, Lionel Fernando, secretary, Ministry of Information, Tourism, Aviation; R Asirwatham, Chairman, Bank of Ceylon, and N L Gooneratne, an architect, who was Chairman, Design Consortium Ltd. At a later stage, the Archbishop of Colombo of the Anglican Church, Kenneth Fernando, and Jayadeva Uyangoda a pro-government academic and Charles Abeysekera, a pro-government retired civil servant and head of a non-governmental organisation joined the delegation.
- 8 Anton Balasingham, LTTE ideologue and spokesperson.
- 9 Currently, Minister of Trade, Industrial Development and Rural Industries.
- 10 Senior Lecturer in Anatomy, University of Jaffna assassinated on 21 September 1989.
- 11 Prominent TULF lawyer, parliamentarian and a director of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, assassinated on 29 July 1999.

- 12 The reference is to Gopalasamy Mahendrarajah with the *nom de guerre* Mahattaya, who was a trusted ally of Prabhakaran. He was subsequently executed by the LTTE on Prabhakaran's orders.
- 13 Kumaran Padmanathan, the elusive arms purchaser of the LTTE, living 'abroad' and operating internationally.
- 14 G Powell, *The Kandyan Wars: The British Army in Ceylon 1803-1818*, London, 1973.
- 15 Walter Laquer, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp 192-198, see particularly p 195.
- 16 J L Gaddis, "Toward the Post-Cold War World," *Foreign Affairs*, 1991, pp 102-122.
- 17 This extract brings together sentences from J L Gaddis's article, pp 103, 105, 108 and 121-122.