

Sri Lanka. The Times of Senthana: Little known Liberator and Silent Giant

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From Political disillusionment towards armed struggle

Sharing with Senthana birth at the time when Gandhi was assassinated and Ceylon received independence, political controversies and liberation struggles of the era have chequered our lives. Reflecting on the 1971 JVP rebellion, Lionel Bopage has written, "... all alternative left groups strongly believed in the seizure of power through armed struggle for social transformation."

Coevally, there were two other related upheavals whose roots were constitutional. Both the government and the Opposition clamoured for the absolute supremacy of Parliament. This was reflected in the debate in August 1968, where Dr. Colvin R. de Silva assailed the 1964 Privy Council ruling by Lord Pearce that Article 29 of the Soulbury Constitution, dealt with 'further entrenched religious and racial matters, which shall not be the subject of legislation.'

The 1972 Constitution presided over by Colvin R. de Silva made parliamentary supremacy absolute and removed judicial checks on legislation, not only the Privy Council's, but more importantly, Justice O. L. de Kretser's voiding of Sinhala Only. To the Tamil minority, it was uprooting of the already much abused protections under Article 29 - which, in the words of Lord Pearce, represented the 'solemn balance of rights,' 'the fundamental conditions on which [the citizens of Ceylon] inter se accepted the Constitution.' The caution voiced by Sarath Muttetuwegama MP, went unheeded. Another upheaval was brewing.

From the time the supremacy of Parliament came into vogue after the English revolution of 1688, many wondered if the parliamentary cure for monarchical absolutism could be as dangerous as the disease. In 1701 Chief Justice Holt said intriguingly in *City of London v. Wood*, "[An Act of Parliament] may discharge one from his allegiance to the government he lives under." He clarified, 'if Parliament violated the limitations implied by natural law, it would be dissolved, and individuals living under it would be returned to the state of nature.' One may wonder if a state of nature, as opposed to a state of law, is the one we now live under.

By the 1980s our children had become exposed to assassinations, aerial bombing, canon fire and sudden death as their early experiences. Palestine, Vietnam and Algeria we read about as boys had become part of our adult lives. Although Senthana and I were engineering students at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, from the late 1960s, I came to know him intimately much later. His sister

Vasantha, with whom I used to have tea in the University of Jaffna Common Room, in the mid-1980s, told me that Senthana was coming home; then began our close friendship that lasted until Senthana died, on 14th June 2020. Despite common sympathies and regular conversations as good friends, it was in death that it struck me in a flow of memories and awakening of gratitude, that he had been, by far, both a rare genius and an eminent giant among dwarfs. The two cannot be separated.

Education, long and hard hours of work to earn our prestigious degrees, the laurels we lie upon and pronounce on every other subject in semi-ignorance, breeds in us harmful arrogance. What we do not acquire is humility, that there is an enormous treasure of the workings of the universe that we can never comprehend. Senthana's father Pandit Veeragathya, who influenced Senthana's deep appreciation of the Tamil classics and his keen ability to separate the wheat from the chaff, is frequently remembered by my wife for his pithy saying, "Read selectively; what you must do, is to think!"

Pandit avoided increasingly dangerous political controversy. Once, a group of militant youth showed Pandit their map of Lanka, dominated by Tamil Eelam. Pandit responded in his acid irony, "Thambi, where are the others going to live?" Senthana was by contrast a committed person, but the former might explain his sardonic humour that helped him to survive in Jaffna's hostile political environment. Those who knew the family well attribute the gentle side of Senthana to his mother, Nahamma, much admired in Vadamaratchy as a dedicated teacher.

Senthana paid little regard to people commending themselves by an array of impressive degrees, he was sceptical. Far from envy it was because his standard of intellectual excellence was highly exacting. It must show itself in the field of human relations, how a person regards questions of justice, how he treats others and applies his mind to these. He valued his mathematical training and what it taught him about analysing problems, social as well as engineering. While taking his degree studies at Peradeniya on the stride, he also spent a good deal of his time at the Jaffna Public Library reading the Times Literary Supplement among other writings. From Marxist authors he acquired a deep interest in liberation struggles around the world.

Life did not permit Senthana to carry a huge array of books from which he could quote chapter and verse. He followed the dictum 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest;' and above all, think! He was a Marxist and a great admirer of Marx as a thinker. Che Guevara was for him a model of humanity and profound intellect, without diminishing the regard he had for the great Indian humanists Bharathya and Tagore, besides Gandhi. For him worthwhile achievement requires unremitting dedication combined with hard work and thorough research.

The Left in this country, he decried as the lazy Left that had let down the Plantation Tamils. He saw the Tamil intelligentsia as a lot who despite their educational attainments had intellectually gone to sleep. Otherwise, it was hard for him to understand how a large segment of the Tamil elite sporting impressive qualifications, prostrated themselves before the LTTE supremo because of their anger in the face of state instigated communal violence, without any foresight or concern over where it was carrying the Tamil people.

Dilemmas of Armed Struggle

The communal violence of 1958, where Tamils leading ordinary lives were punished with mayhem and murder by persons close to the centre of power, was notice given that any crime against them could be ignored at will. Discriminatory laws simply enacted would have been one matter; Senthana observed that what hurt the minorities most was the humiliation. After the communal violence of 1977, where there was strong evidence of the Police having instigated it with the complicity of the political authority, few among the younger Tamils said that an armed liberation struggle was out of

order and many Sinhalese agreed, particularly the new generation of left inclined students in the universities and younger activists, some of whom had been involved in the 1971 JVP insurgency. The 1970s was the era of liberation struggles, of Vietnam, El Salvador and nearer home, the birth of Bangladesh.

Many of the young were deeply affected with a need for revolutionary transformation of the state in Lanka. Some names of students who were together in the Social Study Circle at Peradeniya University give us an idea: Gamini Samaranayake, Mahinda Deshapriya, Dayan Jayatilleke, K. Sritharan, Visvanandadevan, Raja Wijetunge, Karunatilake and Sunil Ratnapriya. Some who had been in the JVP rejected what they saw as its adventurism and political ideology that was superficial and eclectic. Links across communal barriers were also formed at the Marxist study circle of the veteran Marxist N. Shanmugathan, one of whose erstwhile disciples was Rohana Wijeweera, the leader of the 1971 youth insurgency. It was at Shanmugathan's study circle that Rajani Rajasingham met Dayapala Thiraganama, whom she married.

Their aim was broadly a socialist Lanka with equality. Not all of them were ready for an armed struggle. But the pace among Tamils was forced by two events. One was the murder of Jaffna Mayor Alfred Duraiappa in July 1975 and the formation of the LTTE by a group around V. Prabhakaran, who had committed the murder. In 1976, this group met A. Amirthalingam, leader in waiting of the parliamentary Tamil nationalist TULF that made no pretence of condemning Duraiappa's murder. The TULF had played a leading role in branding as traitors its parliamentary opponents, of whom Alfred Duraiappa was one.

This shadowy alliance with little substance between the TULF and the LTTE created the right amount of intimidation or approval that buttressed the TULF's parliamentary monopoly in the North. The state instigated violence against Tamils soon after the 1977 elections changed the political situation drastically.

Even though the LTTE was relatively unknown and there was hope that the TULF would obtain justice for victims of the violence through the Sansoni commission of inquiry, arguments supporting a militant response grew in private conversation, especially among the Tamil expatriates, and drew increasing support. By the time of the PTA in 1979, there were movements that interested people could actually support. That these young men were placing their lives on the line for the public good provoked the question 'what are you doing for the cause?' It placed most people on the back foot. The existence of the cause was not disputed though few dared to take the next step that involved risk.

Even the young activists, many of them socialists, who opposed the LTTE's intolerant nationalism and militarism, felt their credibility to be at stake unless they formed their own military wings. Visvanandadevan was a Marxist political activist who went against his temperament to form a military wing to his NLFT following July 1983. The result was the multiplication of groups, which additions the LTTE was quick to brand as criminal outfits. The militancy entered a new phase when the LTTE leader on 2 January 1982 used Seelan, a confidant of his, to murder Sundaram, a capable leader of the PLOTE that had split off from the LTTE. By this time the militancy had assumed a degree of legitimacy, where many others were ready to make excuses for such murders and preserve their complacency, ignoring the fatal effects of the malaise.

Once the people following the TULF's cue had failed to condemn Duraiappa's murder in 1975; through fear, confusion or complicity, Sundaram's was dismissed as vendetta between armed groups and the disease festered. For those already associated with the LTTE condemnation would have been fatal.

For those of us who professed non-violence, our position seemed to have become merely ritual and even hypocritical; not least because in time taking on Sinhalese civilian targets had among many assumed a degree of legitimacy comparable to the destruction of German cities by Allied bombing during the Second World War. Even though Tamil civilians killed by the government forces' atrocities formed the bulk of the dead, the massacres of unarmed Sinhalese civilians, particularly by the LTTE, failed to arouse the measure of moral indignation it deserved. Some social leaders applauded or bypassed these crimes as a legitimate means of defence. The best among us had to constantly check ourselves not to fall prey to the inhuman within.

Amidst this moral anarchy of civilian killings on both sides, the view of militant groups, in spite of their crimes, as defenders of the Tamil people and 'our boys', gained strength. For Rajani, whose heart was moved by the sacrificial ardour of some militants, particularly Seelan, whose accidental injury in 1982 no other doctor in Jaffna would treat, guided her first steps into the LTTE. However, Seelan's fate within the LTTE, his self-isolation and death in an army ambush, was one of the eye openers which convinced Rajani of its utter inhumanity, a conviction for which she paid with her life. Her husband Dayapala who made his observations from his vantage in the Rajasingham household had warned her, having read the signs when Sundaram was killed.

After her disillusionment, Rajani's motherly ardour was extended to the young whom she saw were by circumstances absorbed into the LTTE; which in turn threw them on the scrap heap as human wrecks after having squeezed out their dedication and humanity like sucked lemon. It took me until April 1986 when the LTTE wiped out its fellow militant group TELO to completely rule them out as capable of any good. Senthana's grasp of political reality matched by his humanity was far in advance of the rest of his generation. There was no confusion in his grasp of what was criminal.

The end of the Liberation Struggle

Senthana's Exceptional Perceptiveness

Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed, in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, that there were two groups who successfully resisted the Nazi propaganda onslaught: they were the strong Christians and the Marxists. Their perceptions were rooted in their understanding of History. Senthana was a critical reader of Marxist literature, whose mind and literary style were enriched from school days by the late classics of English and Continental authors such as Chekov and Joseph Conrad. His defiance of what was inimical to society was total and unwavering. In July 1983, communal violence was unleashed with high level connivance following a bomb attack on an army vehicle in which 13 soldiers were killed. Senthana who was living on Brown Road, not far from the incident, held his son and daughter, each by a hand, and stood still for a long time.

He told his assistant, "They [the LTTE] have started a war without any preparation among the people. This will lead to total destruction." Unlike most of us, who were to a varying extent guided by emotions and public feeling in the rage and fear of the moment, Senthana was quite firmly guided by his intellect.

He viewed the communal violence unleashed on the Tamils in 1958 and 1977 as unpardonable crimes to assuage Sinhalese nationalist compulsions. Sinhalese politics carried on without the slightest expression of remorse, and wanted the Tamils to forget that they ever happened, without any visible change of attitude. He regarded a Tamil liberation struggle to be fully justified, but after preparation and taking the people into confidence.

Senthana had his ear close to the ground and what he had observed in the TULF and the LTTE was

their political bankruptcy. With their rhetoric they created unrealistic expectations and when they found themselves at a dead end, they drew sympathy by provoking the State into some reckless or barbaric action where the people bore the brunt of reprisals.

An early example was the police charge into the crowd on the final day of the International Tamil Research Conference in Jaffna on 9th January 1974, with the intention of arresting the Tamil Nadu politician Janarthanan. Mrs. Bandaranaike's government was sensitive about an outpouring of nationalist fervour, and the organisers had given the Police word that Janarthanan would not speak from the platform. However Mr. Amirthalingam had invited Janarthanan on to the platform for a ceremony of garlands and expressions of mutual esteem. Although Janarthanan got down at the organisers' request, intelligence of the event resulted in armed policemen charging in. Nine civilians died of electrocution by a live line being brought down by police firing into the air.

The political version of the event that received wide circulation, is that the tragedy was a result of instigation by the Jaffna mayor, 'the traitor' Alfred Duraiappa (Arrogance of Power). Of this allegation there was not the slightest hint in the highly commended unofficial De Kretser committee of inquiry report. The rumour, which was given traction from political platforms, set the course for the execution of Duraiappa; his purported killer Prabhakaran earned his spurs as the supremo.

The 1983 July bomb blast was triggered by a crisis within the LTTE. If their militant network lacking political roots among the people was checked by intelligence operations, they would have been in a pickle. Seelan, after his injury that was treated by Rajani was taken to India for advanced treatment. There he fell in love with a Malayali nurse and the Leader ordered him back to Jaffna. In Jaffna Seelan isolated himself, refused to see the Leader and confided remorsefully to his friends, his regret for having on Prabhakaran's order murdered his fellow freedom fighter, Sundaram. He stayed on in a camp after being warned of its discovery and was ambushed and killed. A former Chief of Staff told me that Brigadier Balthazer had worked hard and had cracked several militant hideouts. This work was thrown to waste by the political insanity of the July 1983 violence as an answer to a routine setback.

Most Tamils reacted to the 1983 violence without any hope of justice for the victims, which the appointment of the Sansoni Commission had given in 1977. Some concentrated on exposing the Government internationally or lobbying India or other foreign powers. A choice that seemed to many the only option available was to collect money for the armed groups.

Senthan at this crucial time stood among the exceptions on the ground, totally disillusioned with the fatal direction in which the LTTE was bound to drive the militant struggle. For him the politics of the TULF and LTTE had the same rhetorical roots. Both for him were products of the unimaginative Tamil middle class. As an example of its actual and potential criminality, he saw the elite clinging on to the hideous institution of caste that made a mockery of liberation. The new caste elite represented a marriage of convenience between powerful sections of the Vellala elite and the Valvettithurai elite. The latter lost its importance after the war, while the former became vicarious carriers of LTTE's heroic ideology and rhetoric, purely as a source of power.

As for the nature of Tamil politics, Senthan said that while the educated classes seldom understood, low level officials like village headmen (GS officers) who dealt with the ordinary people knew it from the start. When the report of the 1976 meeting between Amirthalingam and Prabhakaran hit the local grapevine, Senthan told me, a village headman swore in colourful language that knowing the essence of these two, it is a miserable fate that awaited the Tamils.

A healthy liberation struggle, Senthan said, should have no truck with crime, and any occurrence of it should be rooted out; individual killings like that of Alfred Duraiappah for their political leanings

were costly crimes. The Irish Easter Uprising of 1916 through the occupation of Dublin Post Office by members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, who surrendered and were executed by the British State, was described by the poet Yeats as a 'Terrible Beauty.' It reflected the sacrifice by the surrendered men that their execution would lay the seeds for the birth of a new, free, Ireland.

Contrarily, there was no beauty terrible or otherwise in murdering defenceless individuals and the killers parading themselves as heroes and patriots. A public that gives credit to such claims degrades itself by rejecting the first principle of a free people, which is justice.

Senthan explained further on the theme of criminality. Valvettithurai which played an important role in the militant struggle had a legitimate trade with India which was stopped early in the Second World War. Its legitimate activity gave way to a smuggling industry, which also harboured a criminal element that is not good for any society. This element, he said, was in evidence at local sports matches between schools, where strong arm methods were in evidence when their side was losing. The talks between Amirthalingam and the killers of Duraiappah symbolised a liberation struggle drawing on this criminal element. The dangers were sensed by several ordinary people, like the village headman cited earlier.

The first phase of the war

After July 1983, several militant groups confronted the Sri Lankan security forces, with the leading groups patronised by India, whose role is still the subject of speculation. The killing in 1985 of two MPs, Dharmalingam and Alalasundaram by elements from TELO, the group seen as most favoured by India, could not but induce an element of menace into the prevailing ceasefire brought about by India. With the Army confined to its bases, it had given the civilians relief; and there was relative freedom of expression. Dissenting publications came out with the aid of militant sponsors, notably the Theepori group's book on PLOTE's torture camps on Indian soil. The book's leading author Nobert, was last seen in an LTTE prison camp about 1992.

A particular menace was the shelling from Jaffna Fort, which surrounded by militant emplacements, was supplied by helicopter. It was very unlikely that the Army would have started shelling in January 1986 unless it had felt threatened and found it necessary to hold on. The two parties had to settle, or status quo could not hold. At that time the Air Force had also started aerial bombing apparently targeting militant camps, but frequently hitting civilian targets as seen on inspection.

Apparently to test the strength of the militant resistance a commando force was landed by helicopter in early 1986 to take an LTTE camp in Suthumalai. But the TELO joining forces compelled the commandos to withdraw and the LTTE publicly thanked TELO.

Not heeding the lesson, the LTTE largely wiped out the TELO at the end of April 1986. Prabhakaran was then in India and the Indian government could have exerted itself to prevent the annihilation of its protégé. But it did not lift a finger. One wonders if Indian intelligence felt that giving the LTTE a long rope to hang itself would enable India to intervene as saviours of the Tamil people, as happened.

Meanwhile, constant shelling and bombing by the Government had become a hazard that kept everyone on the edge. The militants had no counter at that time. EPRLF leaders Pathmanabha and Douglas Devananda approached Senthan. Senthan, far from being a text book engineer, had a brilliant practical mind. He picked up his skills during working sojourns in Iran, France and Canada before deciding to set up a company in Jaffna. He agreed to manufacture cannon. An assistant told me that tests were carried out with payloads of 25 and 40 kg comprising sea sand. One test was carried out by firing from the railway goods shed to Ariyakulam, a tank. Despite the success the

project was stopped when the LTTE after finishing off the TELO banned the other groups, including EPRLF in December 1986.

The Tamil liberation struggle as prospectively a democratic exercise was killed. For Senthana, this particular use of his skill was an act of civil defence. It suggested that if the Tamil militant struggle had been rooted in the wishes of the people and consideration for their safety, he would have supported it more fully. The coup, where the LTTE using their superior communication equipment for surprise, took sole control of what might have been a liberation struggle, had reduced Senthana along with the people to bystanders. A model Senthana spoke of repeatedly was Che Guevara, of total commitment with concern for the people. While all the groups were active, the Army might have been immobilised as had already happened in several areas; and it had opened up the prospect of a negotiated settlement. Instead, the field was now wide open for the Government forces to break out. The Jaffna Fort from having been a vulnerable defensive position had become a prospective launching pad.

It was a question of time before the Sri Lankan Army advanced and the people were resigned to it or even secretly welcomed it as an alternative to the LTTE's vindictive regime. Meanwhile in late 1986, as shells continued to boom from Jaffna Fort, many among the elite hailed the self-isolated LTTE, an organic growth of elite nationalism, as the sole saviour of the Tamil people. Their commitment did not go beyond words. The rise in repression was signalled by the LTTE's abduction for non-political reasons of the University student Arunagirinathan Vijitharan, who subsequently disappeared. University students undertook a protest fast and large numbers of civilians joined in support. It was to be Jaffna's last spontaneous mass uprising.

Religious and civil society leaders attempted to negotiate a settlement at the University and LTTE Jaffna leader Kittu, with whose personal vendetta the student's disappearance was associated, came at their request. One of the arguments put to the student protestors by some of the negotiators and academic staff was that the LTTE were doing yeoman service keeping the Army at bay, a hugely important task, they said, compared to the issue of one missing student.

Prabhakaran returned to Jaffna from Tamil Nadu in early January 1987. Senthana and a colleague walking along Stanley Road, near the Railway Goods Shed, saw a car stop on seeing them and the lights were switched off. The two found that Prabhakaran had been in the car surrounded by persons protecting him. It struck them that no Tamil group under attack by the LTTE tried to kill Prabhakaran, which would have been relatively easy at that time. Instead they had each separately tried to talk to the LTTE knowing that their end was inevitable.

Once the LTTE cleared the way by eliminating other groups the Sri Lankan forces made rapid advances in the East taking back areas previously controlled by the militants; notable being the Kokkadichcholai Prawn Farm massacre on 27th January 1987. As was expected, the Army launched its operation to take Vadamaratchi in Jaffna's northern sector on 26th May 1987 and there was a large exodus of civilians through Varani to Thenmaratchy. Prabhakaran's home of Valvettithurai was among the first to be taken. It was the talk among evacuees that several cadres protecting Prabhakaran had narrowly got him to safety. I heard it spoken among university staff that when Prof. Sivathamby made the crossing, he had whispered to another, "Did you see who that was?" The reference was evidently to Prabhakaran wearing a sari carried on a bicycle.

The operation was halted by Indian pressure as preparation to its direct entry to much relief among the civilians. Around this time Senthana left with his family to India and returned in 1988. This was the time my regular contact with him commenced.

Murder of Rajani and arrest and release of Senthana

The Murder of Rajani Thiraganama

India had been overconfident about its ability to control the LTTE and very soon an ugly war commenced in which civilians were the chief victims, leaving the community more despondent than before. Against the callousness of the Indian Army, as part of the civilian community, we witnessed how the LTTE deliberately placed civilians in jeopardy and used their suffering for propaganda gain. As our non-violent response, four of us including Rajani Thiraganama, K. Sritharan and Daya Somasundaram talked to civilians widely and compiled their experiences in our book, *The Broken Palmyra*. It was intended to represent the predicament of civilians denied any voice, whose lives became prey to the armed parties.

In a move to intimidate dissent, the LTTE timed its murder of Rajani Thiraganama on 21st September 1989, to just after India announced its troop pull-out. The Sri Lankan Government which had armed the LTTE had also come to an arrangement to allow them a free run in the North-East while maintaining services and nominal sovereignty. The compromise deal with the Premadasa government could neither however, contain the LTTE's ideological pretensions to total power, nor allow it to justify the fragile prize it got in return for all the sufferings it inflicted on the Tamil people.

The day after Rajani was killed; her body was brought to the University. While we were waiting in front of the Common Room, Senthana came up to me. He told me that Sritharan who was badly shaken by the event, appeared to be giving the impression that it was the Indian Army or their allies who had committed the murder. He told me emphatically that this would be to play into the hands of those who sought to exonerate the LTTE. I soon found that such a fear was unfounded. A well-known LTTE spy asked Sritharan, who committed the crime? Sritharan pointed to a group of LTTE supporters and asked him to go and inquire from them.

I was out of Jaffna when the LTTE returned to war with the Sri Lankan Government in June 1990. Meanwhile, the LTTE had begun its assault on dissidents. Sritharan wanted me to stay in Colombo and publish the reports he sent me. In September 1990 Sritharan had to go into hiding in the face of LTTE attempts to arrest him. Senthana was among those who gave him shelter and helped him to escape to Colombo in the disguise of a lorry cleaner. Subsequently LTTE intelligence traced nearly all those who had aided the escape and imprisoned them for several months but had not subjected them to the grievous torture experienced by other prisoners.

Several prisoners held with them were killed. Among them were Manoharan and Chelvi, two students who helped the work of the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) of which Rajani was co-founder. As the Indian Army was departing in late 1989, the LTTE had moved in with the Sri Lankan Government's blessing and recruited many children from the age of ten upwards, besides making political arrests. Once it resumed the war in June 1990, the child recruits were used in highly wasteful military operations. An account of the plight of the injured children was sent to us in Colombo by Chelvi and Manoharan, which appeared in UTHR (J) Report 6 of 4th February 1991.

Kalpna Isaac, who was a journalist at Lake House was reading our report, when the editor H.L.D. Mahindapala became curious. Evidently he showed it to President Premadasa and parts of it were published in the Sunday Observer. I then had no abode in Colombo and sometime stayed with Acca, a cousin who had moved to Colombo with her family. Her daughter worked in a communication centre that was frequented by Varathan, a businessman who had come to know her brother Ravi in the transport business. I met Varathan a few times in Acca's home, but we exchanged no words. By

the time our report appeared in the Observer I was staying with Sritharan and Senthana's sister Vasantha, who had just married. My wife had gone to Jaffna to be with her ailing mother.

Acca was one who would have no truck with violence in any guise, and she never encouraged Varathan, whose coming there in itself probably had no sinister ring. After the Observer feature made its appearance, he took Acca by surprise, speaking to her angrily about me and the UTHR(J). That was the first time Acca took alarm that Varathan may be more than a businessman. She made the only threat within the power of a helpless, but defiant, Vadamaratchi matron. She told him that if anything happened to me, he would not see her alive again.

As it turned out Varathan had far bigger fish in mind. On 21st June 1991, a suicide car bomb blew up at the Joint Operations Command in Colombo. Varathan later committed suicide to evade arrest. Acca's daughter, who worked at the communications centre which Varathan visited, was detained and released after several months. Her son Ravi, a harmless and obliging youth, who lived with a cousin in Jaffna, disappeared after the Army took over in 1995.

The Observer feature above became an issue at a meeting of the University of Jaffna Council which, out of the blue, gave vacation of post notices to me and Sritharan in early May 1991. On 15th April 1992 the LTTE had arrested Senthana. They had been cautious about arresting him because of his fame as an engineer, besides being among the exceptional few that could contribute to an expansion of Jaffna's industrial base.

Senthana's prison term

Senthana was placed under the top level intelligence leader Kapil Amman, who did not torture him but kept tapping him with a stick to make him feel small and at his mercy. In the course of interrogation, Senthana had told him candidly that he had given shelter to Sritharan and helped him to escape. He explained that his intention in doing so was to save life, and if he, Kapil Amman, were in a similar plight he would have done the same for him, as he would for any human being. I knew generally about the imprisonment from Senthana. His assistant, who had been close to him for many years, told me that after the conversation mentioned, Kapil Amman was touched and sought to release Senthana. He must also have been conscious of internal splits within the LTTE as had led to Mahattaya's arrest. He asked Senthana to write directly to the Leader. Senthana was dropped off at home during the Nallur festival in August.

Getting over isolation

Those of us who formed the UTHR(J) in 1988 had chosen it to be a non-violent witness that spoke the truth impartially in defence of the community. But living in a violent environment we could not afford isolation. Soon after the University reopened in 1988 after the Indian Army offensive, on the initiative of Rajani and Sritharan we sought a meeting between members of the staff and the Indian Army, where Rajani placed the civilian case forcefully. We had moved beyond the earlier phase where the University was a passive spectator. The LTTE was alarmed. It only wanted university academics as cheerleaders, to which it returned after it killed Rajani and the students she had inspired.

It was our turn to feel isolated and uncertain after her murder. At this point we received important moral support and help from Senthana and several former leftist militants who had been associated with Visvanandadevan, the engineer I mentioned earlier, whom Sritharan and I both knew at the University of Ceylon. They formed a small group, the NLFT. I came to know Vivekanandan (Anton) at Senthana's office. Anton, who was arrested by the LTTE in September 1990, later escaped with a member of the PLOTE and disappeared after being caught. The LTTE considered them a political

threat and was responsible for several disappearances among them even though they had settled down to normal civilian life. Anton had just married.

Some of them concluded that rather than trying to lead a normal life and get picked off one by one, as happened to Anton, the only option for them was to kill Prabhakaran. Such a decision was not our choice, but it was an honourable choice when peaceful resistance was closed. They did not want to approach the Sri Lankan forces for help. Some had talks with the EPDP and other Tamil groups, and having reached a dead end went abroad.

It was ridiculous to profess non-violence when offering no resistance. We owed respect to those who took up arms to defend a life of freedom. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Letters and Papers from Prison*, which was gifted to me by our Dutch friend Ben Bavinck, made a strong impression on me. Although Bonhoeffer's actions were non-violent, he was charged and executed for links to Admiral Wilhelm Canaris' group that made a failed attempt on Hitler's life. Professing Gandhian non-violence had become a form of escape from responsibility in our context.

Senthan's and Sritharan's influence and contacts, something that Rajani would have fully approved, led to our having individual links and friendships with several former militants from the NLFT and EPRLF (Padmanabha) on the basis of shared political and social objectives, as a means of furthering our human rights work. Among those from the EPRLF were T. Subathiran, T. Sritharan, Thuraiatnam and Kirupa.

Hypocrisy the greatest evil

My wife and I made personal contact with Senthan when we spent about three weeks in Jaffna in 1997 and had several long conversations with him. Subathiran was among those we met. One of the main themes Senthan raised then and subsequently is the enormous evil that stems not from sins of the flesh, but from hypocrisy.

In the vast world of knowledge and exploration, a good university degree is just a token of learning, a foundation to be built upon lifelong. However, Senthan pointed out, many waste their energy extrapolating on ancestry and origins on a very weak factual basis, leading to an arid intellectual climate of chauvinism and intolerance.

Our politics, Senthan explained, takes over from here. The hypocritical notion of Tamil purity taken over from parliamentary politics was imposed at gunpoint by the LTTE. Ideological impurity is in particular the mark of a traitor.

One area where Senthan saw hypocrisy institutionalising itself in the name of purity pertained to marriage, something that is natural, but the LTTE's earlier rules enforced formal celibacy, even as deviations of the leaders were known inside and frequently outside the organisation, in some instances to the point of notoriety. When the Leader married a girl kidnapped from a protest fast in 1984, some who questioned his breach of his own rule left the organisation in fear for their life. An instance of hypocrisy combined with inhumanity that Senthan found characteristic was: The only daughter of a retired post-master from Valvettithurai, and her boy-friend, both LTTEers, were sentenced to death and executed for a love affair in a sentry bunker. This was long after the Leader's marriage, by when the ban on marriage had been lifted.

Senthan knew at first hand the perils that confronted people in the North-East. Travelling by bus in the mid-1980s to meet his brother who was a medical officer in Pottuvil, the atmosphere was menacing when a soldier put him down from the bus. He is convinced he escaped with his life only because he paid humble obeisance to the soldier. The following, both pithy and ironical, on the

plight of the people was published in my *Arrogance of Power* (Ch.22) in 2001:

[Senthan] was cycling to Jaffna through the Ooriyan passage, east of Elephant Pass, in the early 1990s. It was past mid-night when he passed an LTTE sentry. A child in uniform was sharing a gun with an older boy. Apart from the gun, the one mark of adulthood in the child was his wrist-watch. The man asked the child the time. After a pause, the child replied, "Seven-five". The man knew instantly that the time was one-thirty five AM! Such innocents were the first to be killed whenever the Army made a foray.

That was part of the terrible price exacted from the weak whose true plight was distorted to uphold the purity of an elite segment.

A deeply professional Engineer with a strong left Commitment

Senthan's Testament

The following from notes made by Senthan was published in the *Arrogance of Power* in 2001:

"Fear of fascists seems to be a dominant emotion going far beyond even parental or fraternal love. Friendship has become ephemeral. Friend forgets a friend who is murdered. I have seen fathers being forgotten by children and even two wives becoming mistresses of the same killer of their husbands. Lack of devotion even to the inner family makes me wonder what happened to Tamil society which once boasted of its strong family unit. Is it that their earlier devotion to family was no more than manifestly egoistic? How could someone who loves his family at the least not be kind to another man or, in the extreme, not be unkind to him? This is a riddle for me that does not get sorted out easily. Yet I could safely say something - the Tamils have themselves become more rotten inside than being eroded from outside. The Sinhalese, for their original sin, have become the scapegoats for every wickedness committed under the guise of liberation."

"The only way the community can redeem itself is by developing a social detestation of murder - any murder. I hate this man who has hijacked our destiny not because of something he did to my father, sister or my son. But I hate him with all my heart for the crimes he committed on ordinary people, ordinary boys and girls. If I start by saying that I am concerned only if a calamity overtakes members of my family, I will in time lose even that sympathy for my own family as has happened to the majority, particularly to educated members of this community."

More Rotten Inside

Not long after in 2002 came the Norway-brokered peace process based on foreign expertise on what ails us. This expertise in turn was fed by local scholars estranged from ground realities affiliated to these foreign institutions. It was a peace process in which the only voice that counted as representatives of the Tamil people was that of the LTTE. The conscription of Tamil children into LTTE ranks was tolerated in the name of peace rather than being seen as a warlike action.

Not to probe this phenomenon's oppressive and criminal dimension, and to fantasise on its political superstructure, enabled a genre of academic research that legitimised the LTTE. It did so by romanticising Tamils under the LTTE as a primitive society, where crime had lost its meaning and any inhumanity was overlooked as justification of a fight for survival. What was painful was to see Tamil expatriate academics either contributing to this portrayal of denying the people agency, or succumbing to silence and shaming. A sizeable local elite component was carried along and its effect on the Western-backed peace initiative was a reversal. One of the Norwegian mediators' lowest

points was turning a blind eye to LTTE's massacre of children recruited by the Karuna faction in April 2004 as an 'internal matter for the Northeast' (UTHR Bulletin 36).'

The way organised scholarship functions, where mediocrity is protected by institutional and career interests, a voice like that of Senthana coming from a deeply analytical mind and finger firmly on the native pulse, has little chance of reaching decision-makers. In 2003, defying the LTTE threat T. Subathiran had worked closely with Mayor Sellan Kandian to reopen the renovated Jaffna Public Library that had been closed after it was wantonly burnt down in 1981.

Not long afterwards Subathiran was shot dead by an LTTE gun man. Although in the EPRLF, Subathiran was widely trusted in the community and militants in other groups have acknowledged the unstinting help he gave them when left abandoned by the march of events. Although the LTTE was wiped out in 2009, its ideology prevails and dissident voices are systematically muffled. The stone in the Public Library with Subathiran's and Sellan Kandian's names on it commemorating its reopening was recently removed on the order of the Mayor. Another name on the stone was that of Councillor Iruthayaraj, who was also killed by the LTTE. It may not even be Mayor Arnold's personal wish. Tamil politics as Senthana said 'is more rotten inside than being eroded from outside.'

An illustration of fear of fascists that leads people to suppress the truth, and therefore the memory of near ones murdered by the LTTE is illustrated in the case of Principal Sivakadatcham. It was also an instance of elected representatives being used as willing or unwilling minions to doctor history and multiply the grief of a bereaved family forced to sit through a charade of lies.

Kopay Christian College Principal Sivakadatcham was murdered on 11th October 2005 by a lone gunman who called him out of his home and shot him dead. Being zealous for the welfare of the school, he had canvassed funds for the expansion of facilities, including from the EPDP. On 10th October he had addressed the commemoration for Malathy, LTTE's first woman 'martyr', which created the context for blaming the killing on the State's agents.

The body of the victim was covered by a Tiger flag and the funeral was presided over by three MPs from the LTTE-set-up Tamil National Alliance (TNA), Gajendran, Eelavethan and Sivanesan, against the wishes of the eldest daughter who was crying. The State was blamed and some students who demonstrated were later killed by state forces. Although in a current UTHER (J) bulletin, based on local information we pointed to the LTTE, I referred to the matter again in my book *Palmyra Fallen* of 2015. Having talked to the victim's wife and others who knew him, I gave testimonies which left open the possibility or likelihood of the State being responsible.

A colleague at Jaffna University, who read the book, corrected me and introduced me to a teacher, an old boy of the school who knew Sivakadatcham's family and was in the midst of the events. He knew the killer and his testimony matched the first accounts that reached us in 2005. A member of the family had recognised the killer on the fatal night. The Principal had ignored instructions from the LTTE not to get help from the EPDP for the school. The killer who had been calling on the Principal had persuaded him to speak at Malathy's commemoration, as insurance for his safety. The killer, Jeyakanthan (26) was weeks later detained by the Army at Inuvil on a tip off and his was among five bodies of persons shot dead and dumped near Jaffna town on 24th December 2005.

For Sivakadatcham's family, and his brother, a businessman in Toronto, the need to blame the killing on the Government is an indication of the compulsions of a Tamil society where victims of the LTTE were stigmatised. The family we learn had been divided on the cover-up.

Unlike most crimes of fascism where the victims earned public esteem for their courage and defiance, among Tamils families have to live in dread of the stigma attaching to the departed. It

represents vividly the corrupting effect of lies protected by power, which Senthana pointed at.

The LTTE as a force died 12 years ago, but Tamil public life goes on as though its ghostly wishes dictate how people should think and speak. It was easy to commemorate Rajani in Jaffna while there was confusion about who killed her. Once the truth became known, the main obstacles to remembering her came from the University where she taught. Several of those from whom a better standard was expected, turned zombies at the mention of her name.

What ails us?

Senthana observed that although we had an educated class in this country our politics has been narrow. Academic life in our small country is governed by unwritten rules of censorship. But it is also smaller countries that have led the way in greater intellectual openness. Two examples Ponnambalam Arunachalam chose as worthy of emulation are Switzerland and Denmark. Senthana felt that we who are lacking in achievement and discipline to negotiate the challenges of the real world, fail to address it objectively. Having had working experience in France and Canada, he felt that we, who run down the West as part of our boasting about ancient achievements, would not catch up with it for a long time. Those in the West, he said were better adjusted, better read and have a broader approach to the world.

He was impressed with a French engineer he worked with, at whose home he discussed an engineering problem after working hours. His young daughter came with a sheet of music. He interrupted the discussion by playing a few bars for her on the piano and explaining them to her. In Canada too he stayed with a hostel run by a priest, where too he was impressed with the attitude to work.

We have a long way to go to learn intellectual independence and intellectual freedom, without which we would fail our people, particularly in the challenge of education. And we fail to see the obvious. Senthana lived the life of a lover of freedom and of humanity. It is significant that as a Marxist he admired Che Guevara as an individual and an exemplar of freedom, but would have resented the regimentation under communist regimes. He admired the West for its relative freedom.

We, Senthana said, have wasted too much time and fought a war over a political settlement, when settlement is very simple. Federalism proposed by Chelvanayakam, he felt is the right settlement, which the Sinhalese leaders have talked around ever since without doing anything about it. This attitude is a manifestation of our backwardness. When our people emigrate to the West, he observed, they take the rights available to them for granted almost immediately. But their warlike attitude springs up emotionally, the moment they confront the situation at home. What was done to the Plantation Tamils, without parallel in the civilized world, was an instance of our pettiness, he explained.

About the Sinhalese, he said, their strengths are in cricket and humour. But as regards political accommodation, he described them in the subtle irony characteristic of him, as 'kashtamana aakkal' - 'a difficult people'.

As regards life as an engineering student at Peradeniya from 1968 to 1972, he is full of praise for the staff and students as generally decent folk and the students in particular, as friendly and fun-loving. Senthana had a good grasp of literature written in several languages and was a reliable judge of the quality of writings and had earned respect for his poetry and writing in Tamil. He said that to reach the world, you should also write in English. He liked to write books in English. That was one aim the circumstances of his life had denied him.

On education at Hartley College, Point. Pedro, Senthana said that under Principal K. Pooranampillai school discipline had a military flavour to it, but the students were taught perfect English which helped them in life. But the high point of his school days was old fashioned teachers like R.M. Gunaratnam, who took a keen personal interest in the students, trying to bring out the best in them.

Senthana was the founder of Skylark Engineering, which concentrated on the design, development and maintenance of machinery for local industries based on produce of the Palmyra palm and other needs. In a region where the only major industry was the government-built cement factory, Senthana's mechanical engineering skill and innovativeness had great potential and he was confident of being able to expand the scale. But circumstances forced him to restrict himself. Senthana was surprised at the priority given by young engineering graduates to seek work outside the region or abroad. He felt there is so much local scope for creativity, to earn a decent living and pay the employees well.

Rajan Hoole

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P.S.

The Island

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