

Review: The Vavuniya Diaries

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The Vavuniya Diaries, by Neville Jayaweera
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This slim memoir spanning a few months in 1971 is noteworthy for its insider view on the failed first insurrection of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP—Peoples Liberation Front), or more exactly its repression somewhere remote from Colombo and the southwest, by a principal participant. The author was then Government Agent, that is the top-most administrative official, in undivided Vavuniya (before Mullaithivu had been carved from it).

Jungle Outpost

This Tamil majority northern district was sprawling and forested and populated by poor peasants and wild animals. It was a punishment station “away from the comforts of home, family and friends”, for public officials out-of-favour with the incumbent government; and is variously described by Jayaweera as a “jungle outpost”, “Siberia”, and even “gulag”!

Their politically motivated transfer was to affect the loyalty and morale of police personnel and other state cadre as news of a daring bid for state power by a shadowy movement of Sinhala radical youth – known colloquially as ‘Cheguara’ (through association with the image and example of the Argentine-Cuban revolutionary Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara) – trickled in from the Sinhala villages of Madukanda, Mamaduwa and Pavatkulama, to the town.

After his previous roles as Government Agent of Jaffna during the implementation of the ‘Sinhala Only’ Act – narrated in his Jaffna: Exorcising the Past and Holding the Vision (Ravaya Publishers, 2014) – and as Chairman cum Director-General of the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation, Jayaweera had anticipated measuring the length of his sentence in Vavuniya by “purchasing paddy and looking into corruption in cooperative societies”.

The eruption of armed rebellion from 4th April 1971 and until its eradication (in Vavuniya at least) by mid-August, changed the situation utterly.

Writ of the State

As Government Agent, Jayaweera was responsible for facing down the JVP's challenge and maintaining the writ of the state during those hot months. The defence of the town and its police station was critical.

The JVP strategy of a 'one-day revolution' boiled down to storming police stations and arming themselves from their arsenal of weapons and ammunition; along with taking the political and administrative hierarchy up to prime minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike into captivity and possibly execution. Vavuniya town was an asset to both the state and the JVP for its location on the arterial road connecting Jaffna to Colombo and Mannar to Trincomalee and the rail-link between north and south.

Vavuniya police station came under attack on the night of 4th April, lasting into the early hours of the next morning, until the rebels withdrew. Later on the 5th, Vavuniya town itself was besieged by between 100 and 150 armed men, vastly outnumbering the police. An infantry platoon from Mannar only arrived that afternoon.

As the reader can guess, the story that unfolds is of the successful resistance to the seizure of authority by the JVP, ending instead in the capture of its known supporters, and against all manner of worries. Aside from the constant threat to his life by the insurgents, these problems ranged from minimal support from a distant and panic-stricken central government – Felix Dias Bandaranaike, nephew and advisor to the prime minister, is a malevolent character in this drama – to a conspiracy against his own life from within the state security force.

However, the author's purpose lies elsewhere, setting this book apart from the recent crop of autobiographies by senior civil servants of yesteryear.

Make amends

In the twilight of a long and eventful life, Neville Jayaweera attempts to make amends for the loss of innocent lives on his watch; and to accuse an unjust socio-political and economic order of begetting the (wholly legitimate, in his view) reaction in the form of the JVP. Along the way, non-believers must endure a heavy dose of spirituality: for it was also in Vavuniya, in the midst of the turmoil outside and within him, that the author renewed his Christian faith.

A centrepiece of the book is to do with a 21 year-old man who had attended a couple of the JVP's political education classes, known as the Panthi Paha ('Five Lessons'). On the urging of his wife and accompanied by her and their infant child, he voluntarily surrendered himself to Jayaweera who assured his prompt release the following day, after interrogation by the army officer in charge of the local military unit.

The next morning the Sandhurst-trained captain announced that the individual had attempted to escape from his custody and been fatally wounded in the chase. As authorised under emergency regulations, his body was disposed of in the forest, burned on rubber tyres without magisterial inquiry and a coroner's inquest. Sickened to his stomach, Jayaweera knew this chain of events to be a concoction. He movingly recalls the disbelief and anguish of the young wife, who had trusted in him, when he broke the news to her.

Upon inquiries from villagers, Jayaweera discovered that the army captain had made a sport of "grilling holes in the palms of youth who were in some instances no more than ten years old,

ostensibly for extracting information about rebel hideouts". At least 30 of those he had claimed to kill in combat, were unarmed youth who had been murdered.

He describes his swift action to have the captain and his unit removed from Vavuniya and to submit an inventory on the unlawful killings and missing persons in the district to his superiors in Colombo. Nevertheless, "...any attempt by me to launch even the most rudimentary investigations ran up against a stone wall of hostility and silence from the military."

No court martial of the captain took place, nor was any further action taken by the government on his report, likely because of the political embarrassment it would have caused. Whereas the government later claimed no more than 1,100 civilian deaths across the island; by Jayaweera's reckoning the true number was closer to 20,000.

Barrel of a gun

The author admits that "ultimately, the state has to depend on the barrel of a gun, rather than on a moral code or even on the Courts of Law, to enforce its authority". However, he explains his exposure of these events, after almost half-a-century, because of the destructive effect on society of concealing such abuses. As people of integrity know, and as the subsequent decades in Sri Lanka tragically illustrate, impunity and non-accountability for gross crimes reproduce them in a cycle without end.

What is also surprising in an account by a former senior state administrator is his assessment of the JVP and its cause. The insurgents he says were drawn from "a militant peasant group ... [that] sought to capture power in the name of a new social class...who had lived on the fringes of society for hundreds of years." The JVP was a systemic challenge. It "threatened the whole system" and "for that reason, the entire system ... mobilised to defeat it.

His criticisms of the JVP appear to be not of its goal but rather its strategy and methods. He points out that it had not mobilised the working class and the peasantry nor "grasped the theory and practice of revolution". Both in 1971 and between 1987 and 1989, the JVP had embarked on an adventurist course, which he says not without reason, only consolidated the extreme right on both occasions.

He is sceptical of its current avatar. Parliament has been the graveyard of the JVP, he says, as it was earlier for the 'Old Left'.

Unique addition

The Vavuniya Diaries is a unique addition to our understanding of the 1971 insurrection, the amateurishness of the JVP and the state alike, and the tensions of that time. Its promoters, Marshal Fernando and Susil Sirivardhana, are owed our appreciation for realising its release.

It would have benefited from stronger editing and closer attention to layout. The foreword could have been used to introduce the lay reader to the political dynamics of that period and the origins and ideology of the JVP in particular. The initials JVP are repetitively mis-spelled as Jathika Vimukthi Peramuna, which was a political vehicle of the arch-racist K. M. P. Rajaratne, and no relation to the party founded by Rohana Wijeweera and his comrades. A state of emergency was declared on March 16th and not subsequent to the insurrection.

The author does not expand on a couple of intriguing asides. What were the "tensions' that sparked an assault on the police station in May 1971...by the army!? How was the peaceful surrender of the remaining rebels in hiding achieved in August 1971? He is silent on the attitude and part of Tamils, who comprised 70 percent of the district, to the events he details. Were there any indications among Tamils of support for the nascent armed nationalist movement in the north?

Neville Jayaweera resigned from the Sri Lanka Administrative Service and therefore as Government Agent of Vavuniya in early 1973. But not before he was subject to further harassment and threat of imprisonment by the Minister of Public Administration, Felix Dias Bandaranaike. He was only 42 years old. Shortly after, Jayaweera and his family left Sri Lanka and have lived ever since in England. He never returned to Vavuniya.

B. Skanthakumar

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* http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=179287