

The Will to Freedom

An Inside View of Tamil Resistance

Adele Balasingham

2001-10-06

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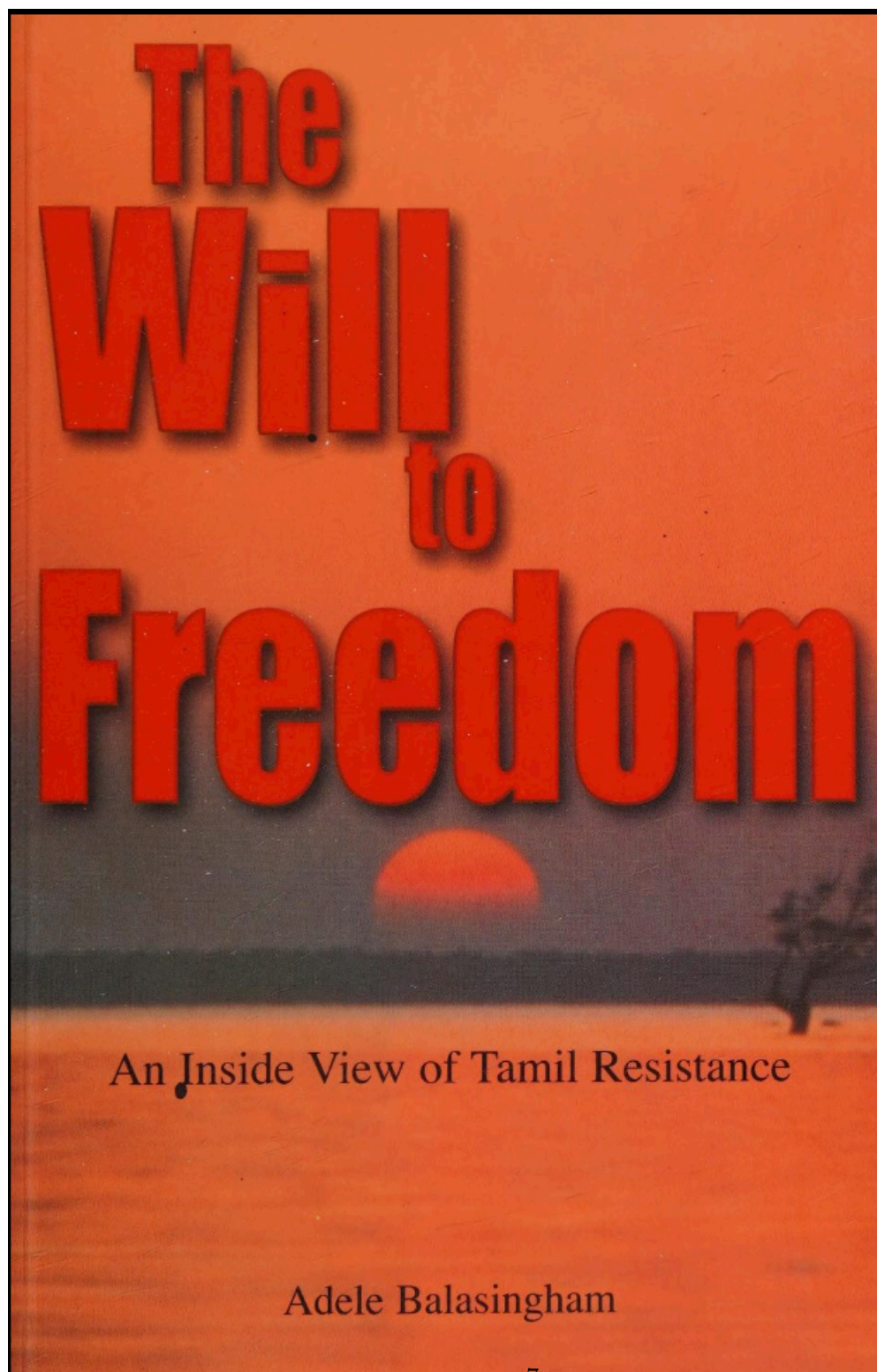
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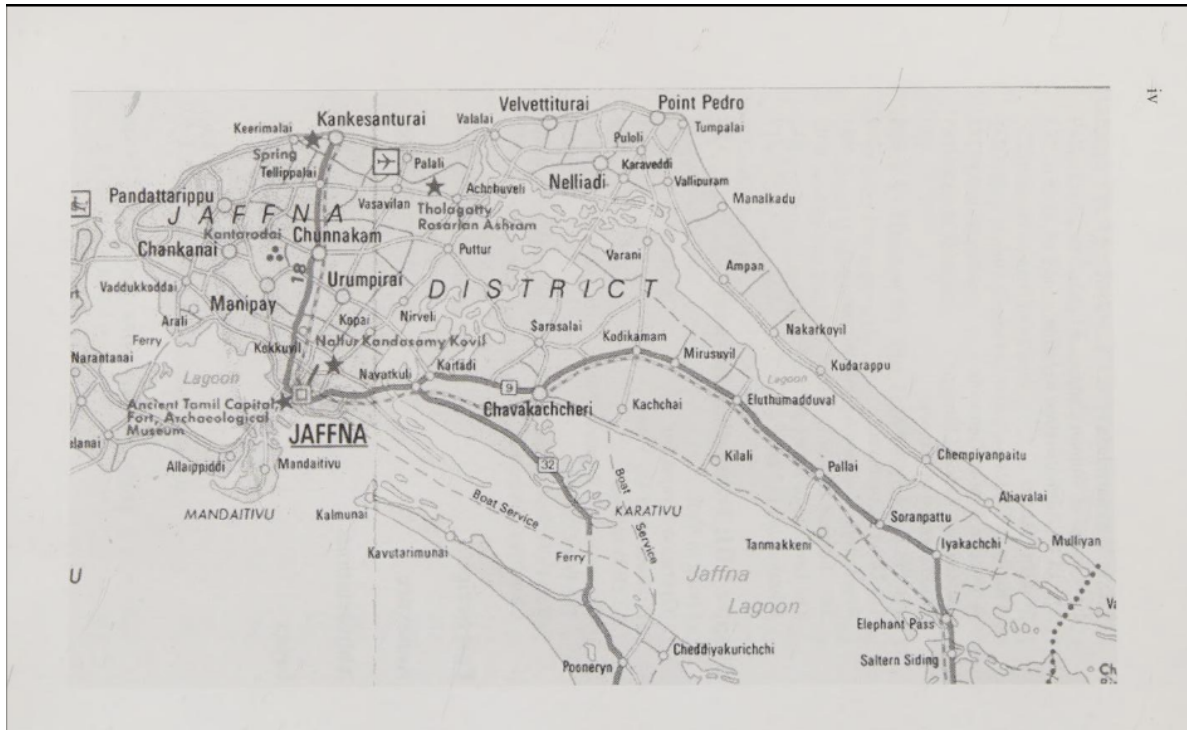
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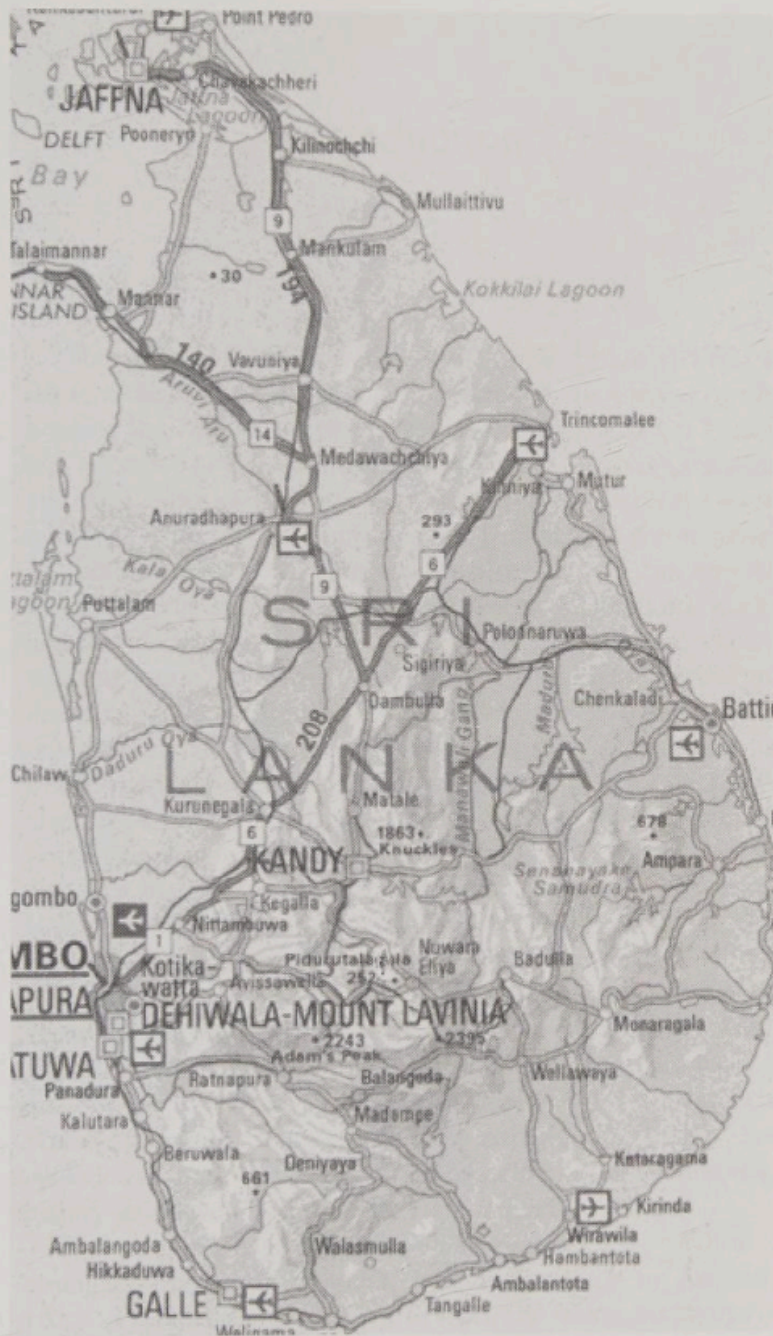
Front Cover



The Will to Freedom: An Inside View of Tamil Resistance
Adele Balasingham

Maps





Photos

Bala in his early thirties and myself at 24.

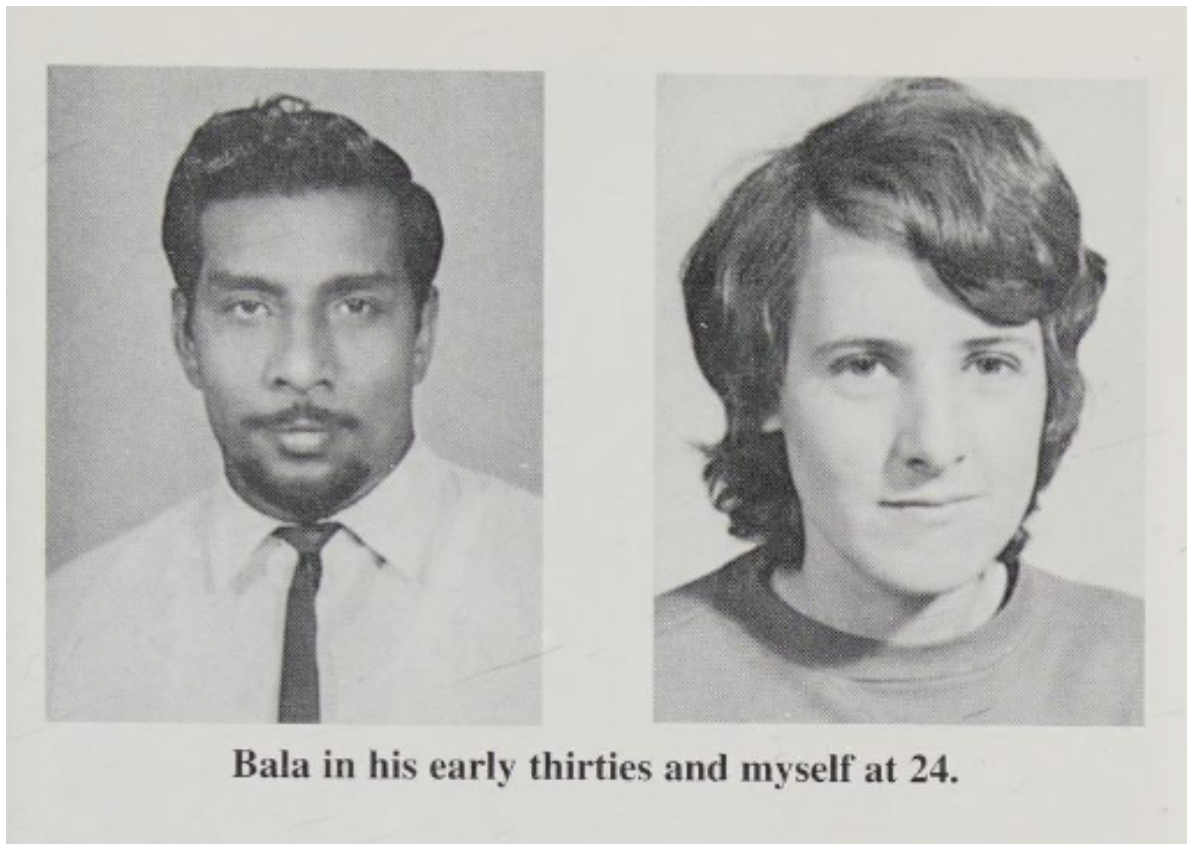


Figure 1: Bala in his early thirties and myself at 24.

Our wedding in South London, in 1978.



Our wedding in South London, in 1978.

Figure 2: Our wedding in South London, in 1978.

With my family in Warragul, Australia in 1989.



With my family in Warragul, Australia in 1989. *From left to right (seated)* my father, Bruce Wilby, myself, my mother Betty. *Standing* my older brother Brent, my younger sister Lynley and my younger brother David.

Figure 3: With my family in Warragul, Australia in 1989. *From left to right (seated)* my father, Bruce Wilby, myself, my mother Betty. *Standing* my older brother Brent, my younger sister Lynley and my younger brother David.

The wedding of Mr. Pirabakaran and Mathivathani (Mathy)

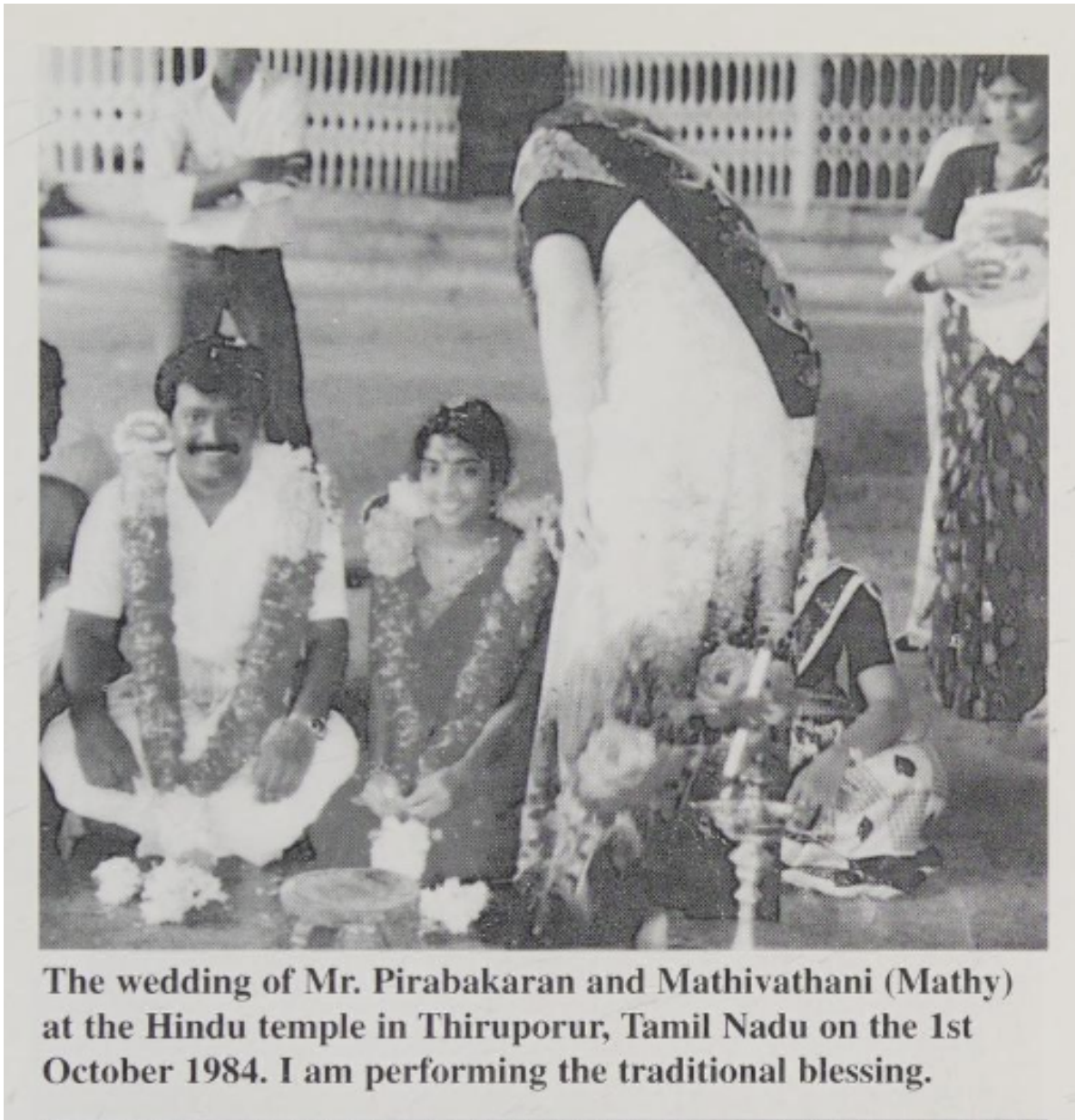


Figure 4: The wedding of Mr. Pirabakaran and Mathivathani (Mathy) at the Hindu temple in Thiruporur, Tamil Nadu on the 1st October 1984. I am performing the traditional blessing.

Bala being deported to London from India in August 1985.

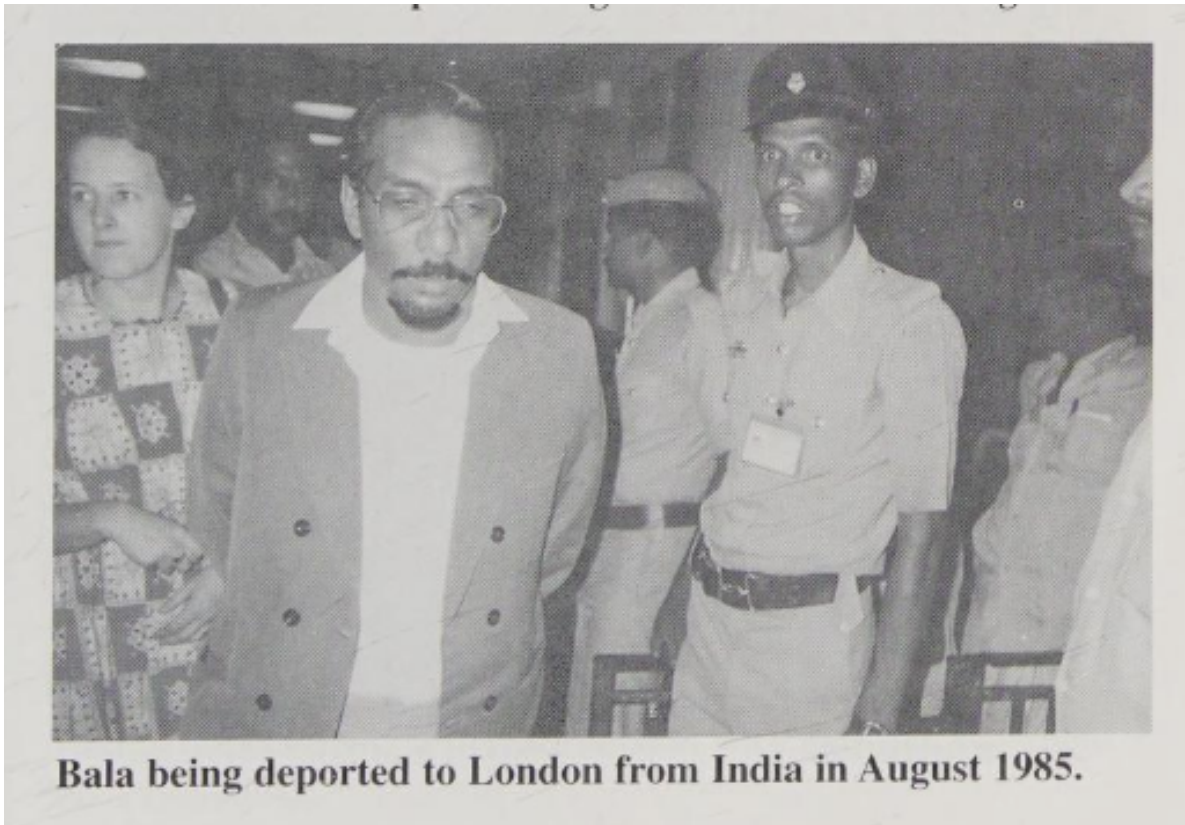
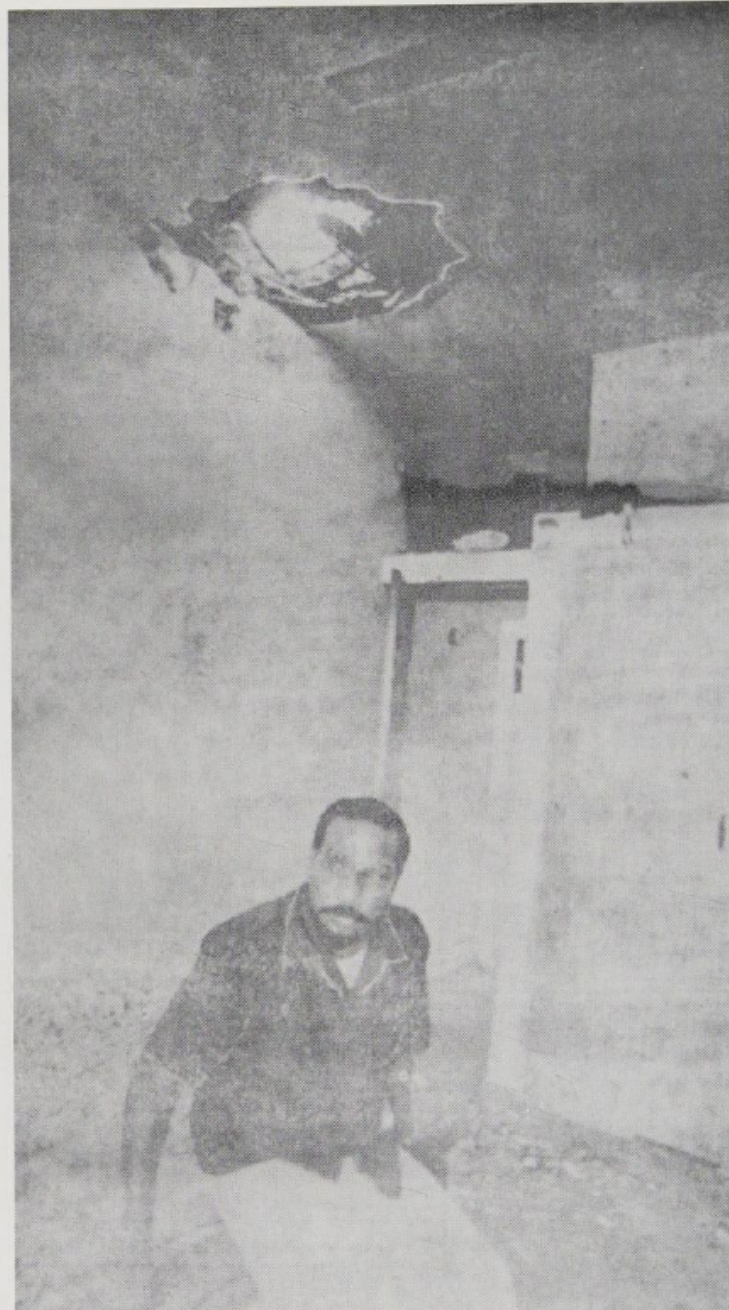


Figure 5: Bala being deported to London from India in August 1985.

A hole in the roof of our bedroom caused by bomb blast in Chennai, 1985.



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Figure 6: A hole in the roof of our bedroom caused by bomb blast in Chennai, 1985.

LTTE delegation with the former Sri Lankan President Mr. R Premadasa.

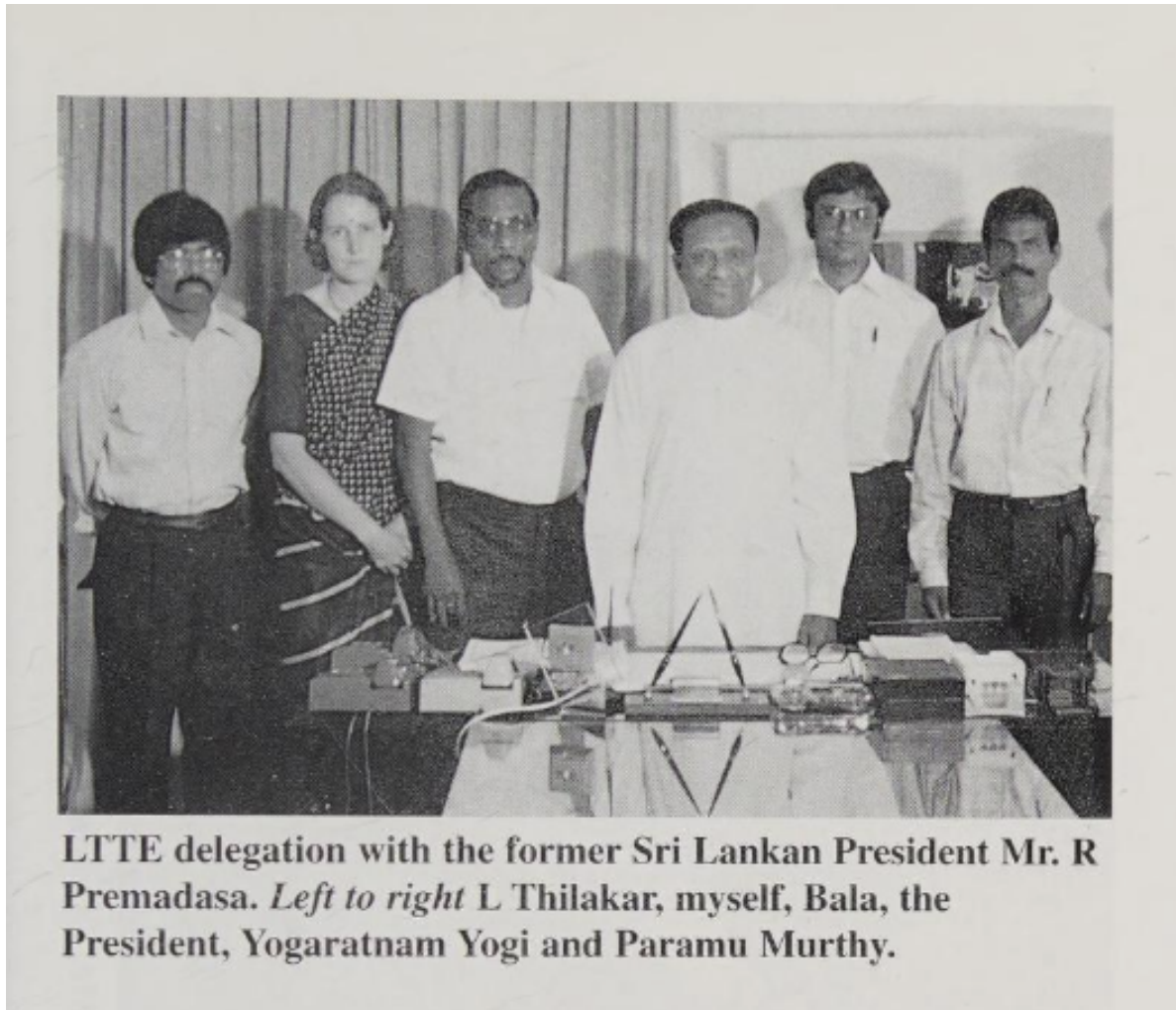


Figure 7: LTTE delegation with the former Sri Lankan President Mr. R Premadasa. Left to right L Thilakar, myself, Bala, the President, Yogaratnam Yogi and Paramu Murthy.

Taking notes during a private session with the then President Mr Premadasa.



Taking notes during a private session with the then President Mr Premadasa.

Figure 8: Taking notes during a private session with the then President Mr Premadasa.

In the Mullaitivu jungle with leopard cubs.

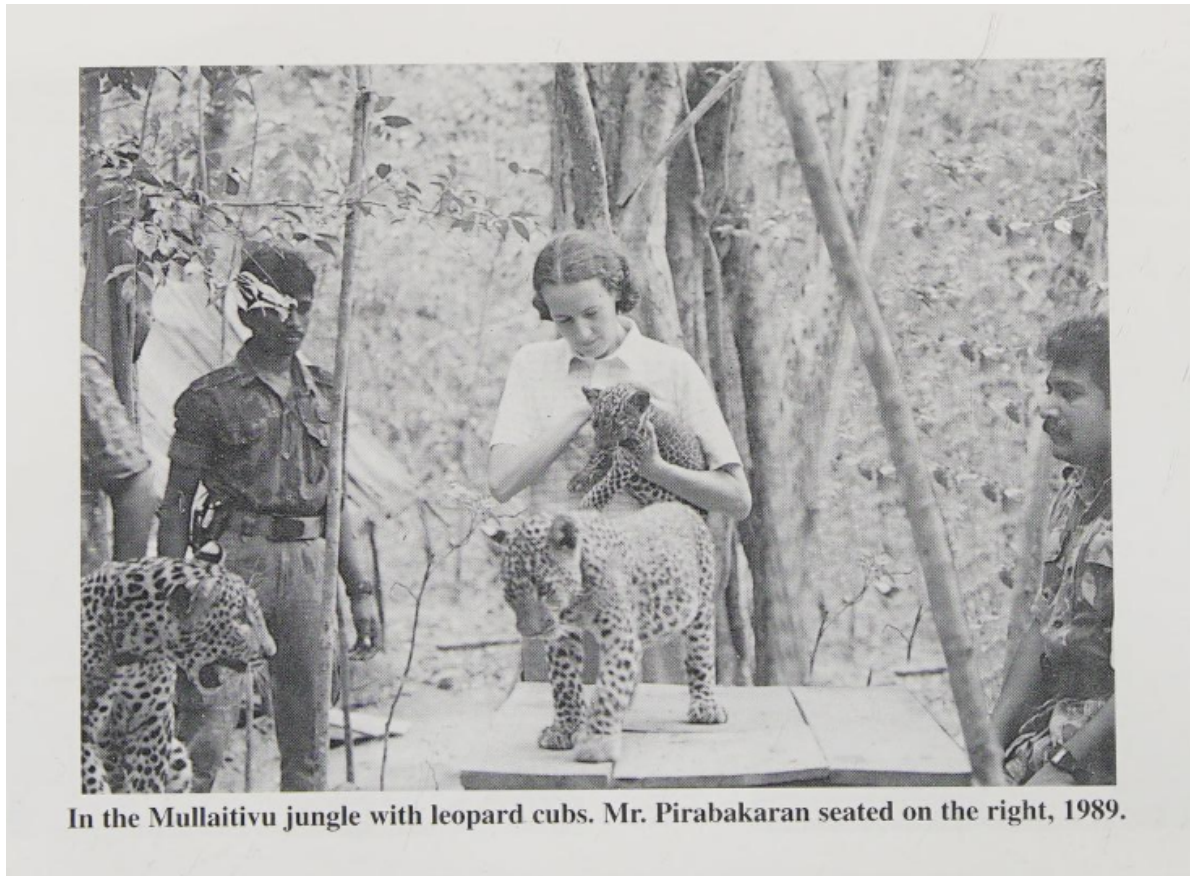


Figure 9: In the Mullaitivu jungle with leopard cubs. Mr. Pirabakaran seated on the right, 1989.

Sugi, the former commander of the women fighters, leads me to the jungle training camp, 1989.



Sugi, the former commander of the women fighters, leads me to the jungle training camp, 1989.

Figure 10: Sugi, the former commander of the women fighters, leads me to the jungle training camp, 1989.

Bala and myself in discussion with Mr Pirabakaran in his 'one-four' Base at Alampil, 1989.

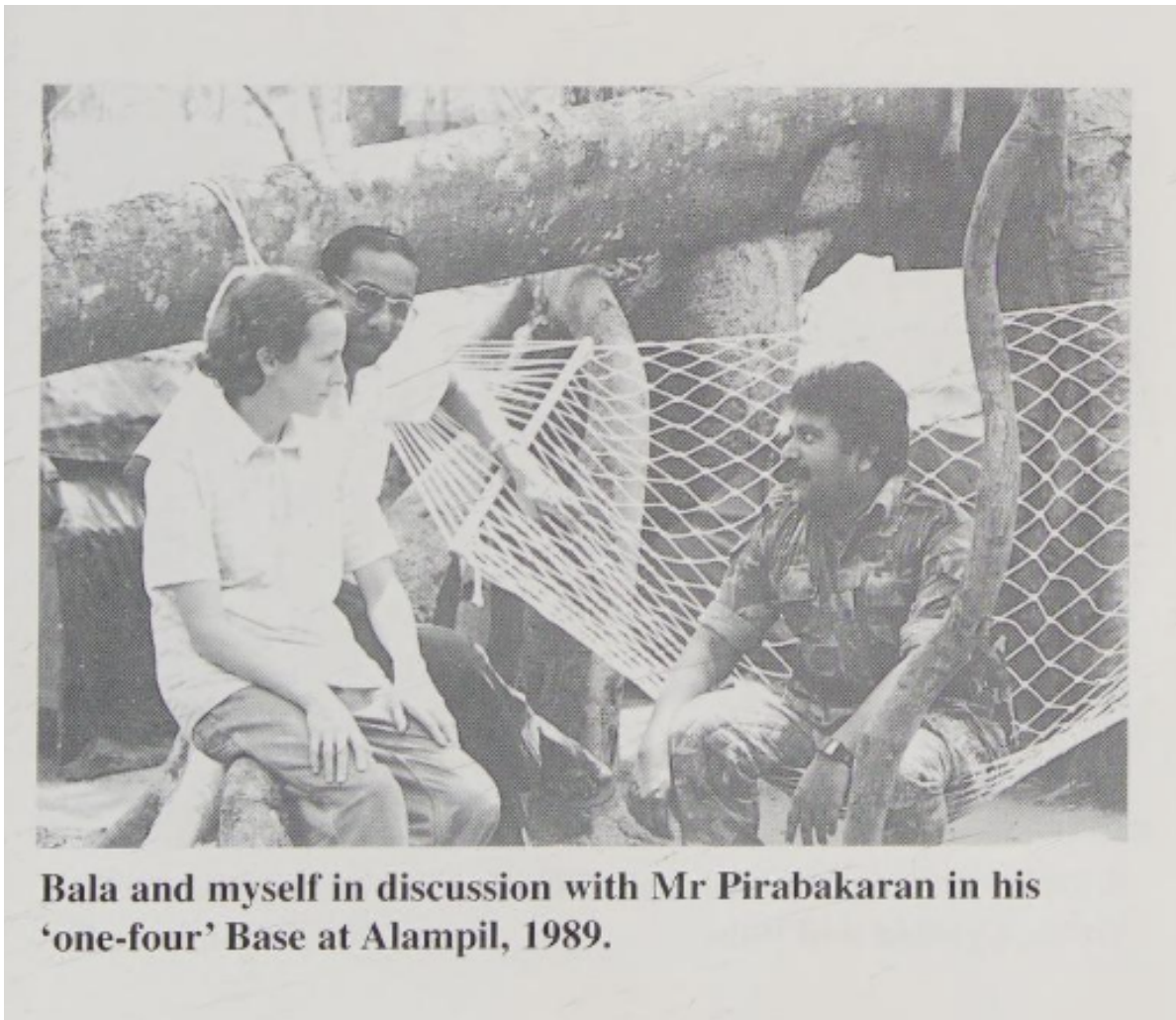


Figure 11: Bala and myself in discussion with Mr Pirabakaran in his 'one-four' Base at Alampil, 1989.

Meeting the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Mr Karunanidhi in Chennai, 1989.



Meeting the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Mr Karunanidhi in Chennai, 1989. *From left to right, Mr Karunanidhi, Bala, Yogi and myself.*

Figure 12: Meeting the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Mr Karunanidhi in Chennai, 1989. From left to right, Mr Karunanidhi, Bala, Yogi and myself.

Kittu's wedding in Colombo, 1989.



Figure 13: Kittu's wedding in Colombo, 1989. From left to right myself, Kittu, Cynthia and Bala

The chief negotiator for Sri Lanka, Mr Hameed

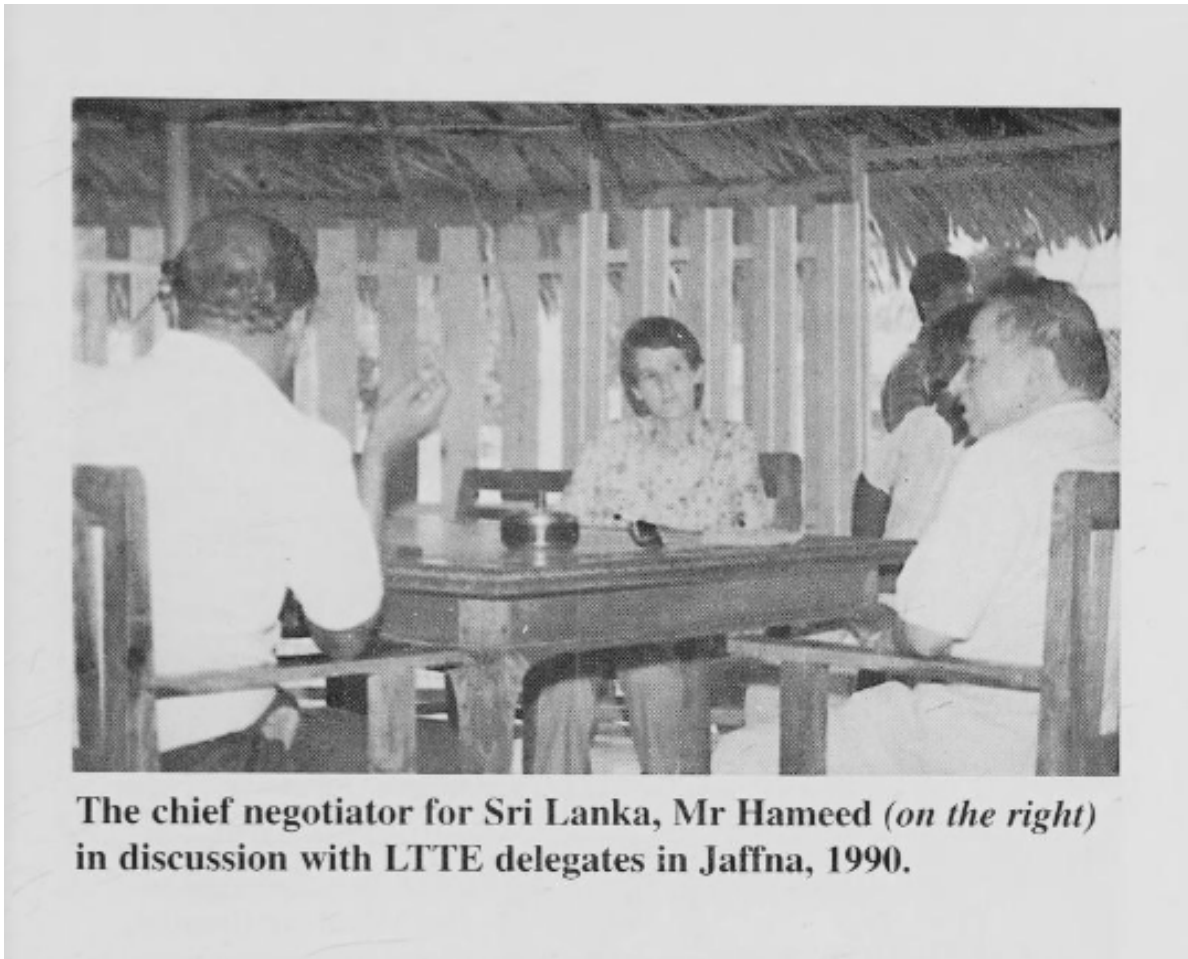


Figure 14: The chief negotiator for Sri Lanka, Mr Hameed (on the right) in discussion with LTTE delegates in Jaffna, 1990.

Discussing with ICRC officials in Jaffna.



Discussing with ICRC officials in Jaffna. On the left is Dr Pathmalojini, 1991.

Figure 15: Discussing with ICRC officials in Jaffna. On the left is Dr Pathmalojini, 1991.

Addressing the women's conference at the Windsor theatre, Jaffna in 1990.

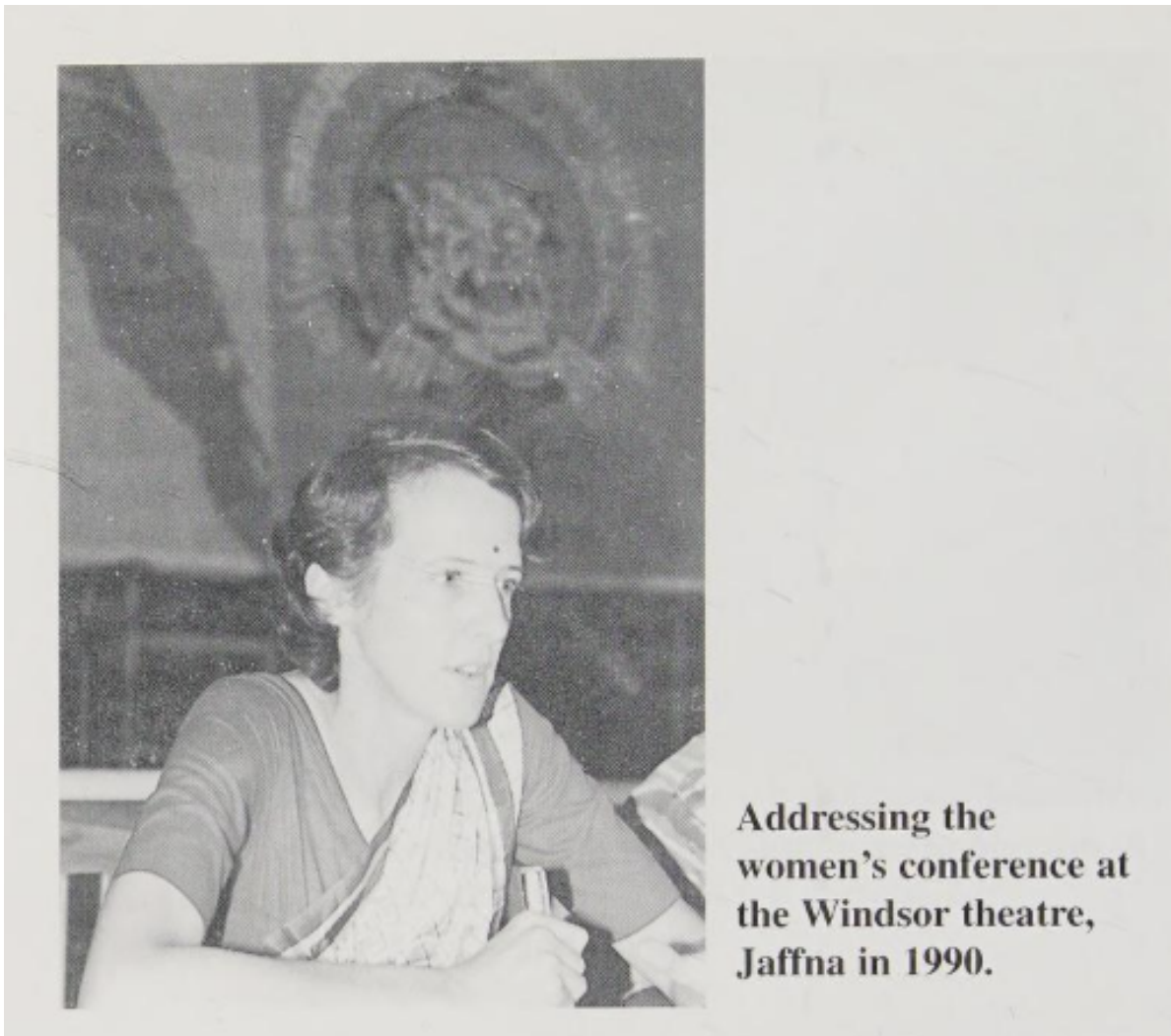


Figure 16: Addressing the women's conference at the Windsor theatre, Jaffna in 1990.

Myself with Col. Kittu's mother, affectionately called 'Kittu Amma' in Jaffna, 1990.

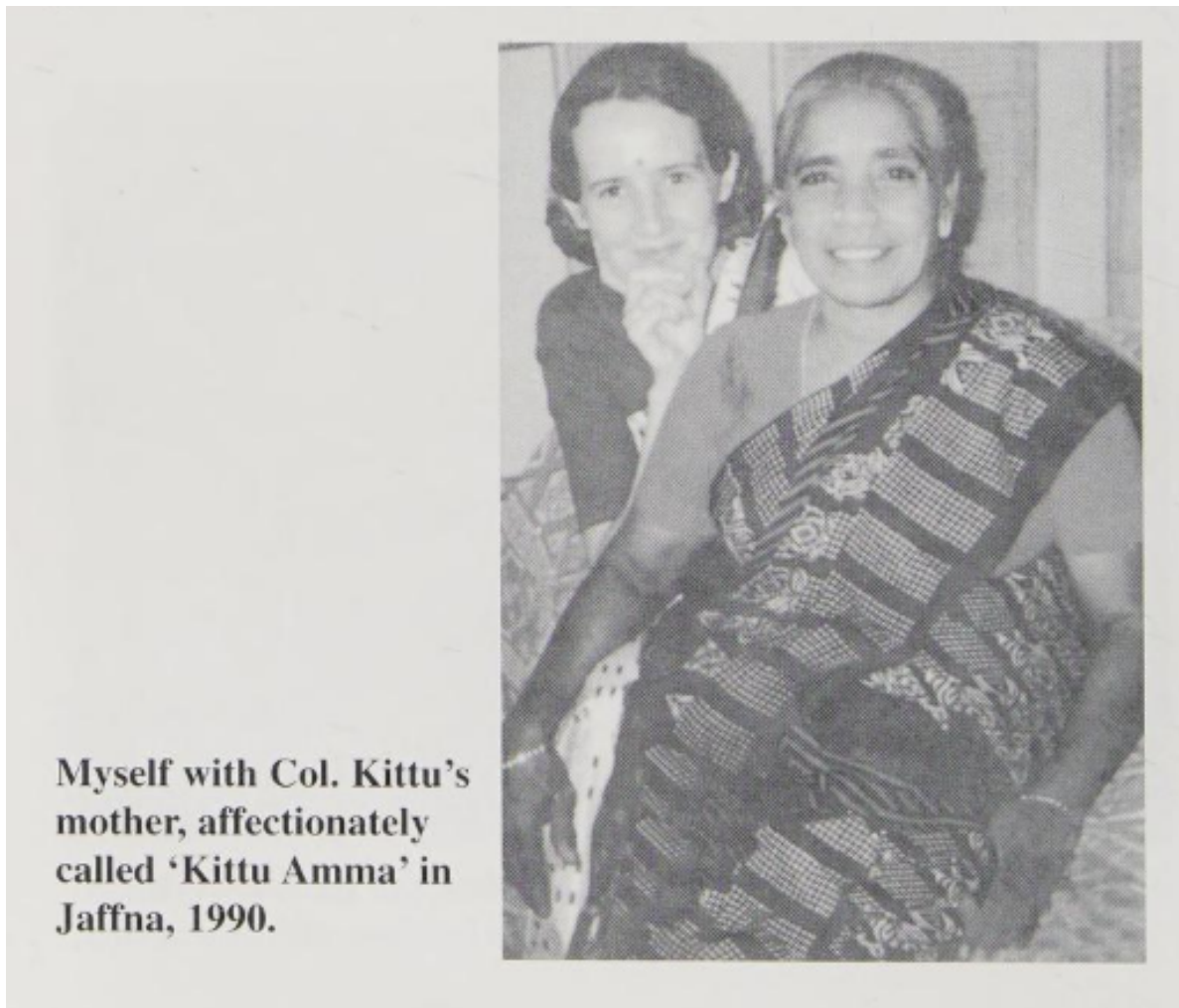


Figure 17: Myself with Col. Kittu's mother, affectionately called 'Kittu Amma' in Jaffna, 1990.

Addressing a public rally in Batticaloa 1989

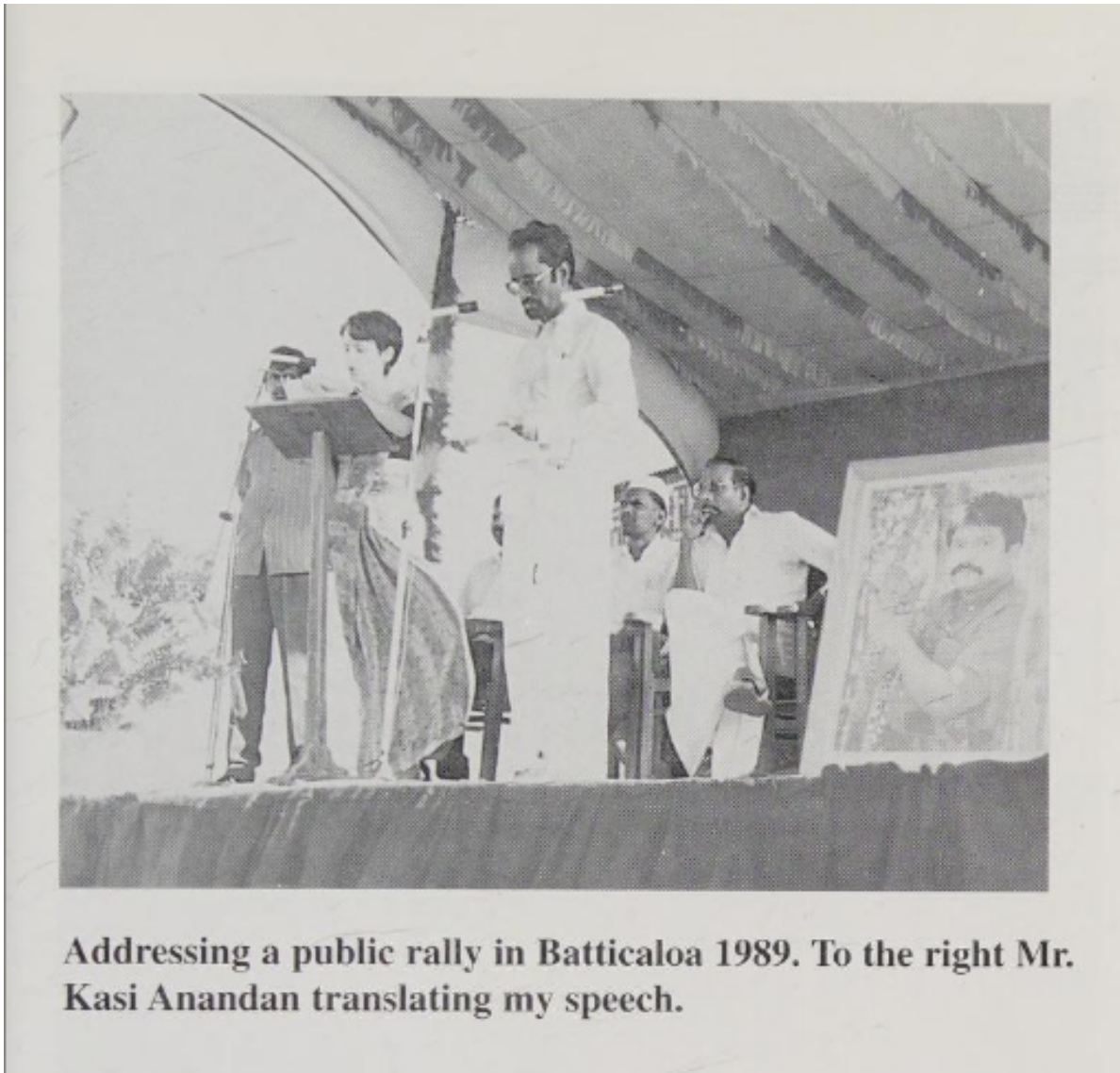


Figure 18: Addressing a public rally in Batticaloa 1989. To the right Mr. Kasi Anandan translating my speech.

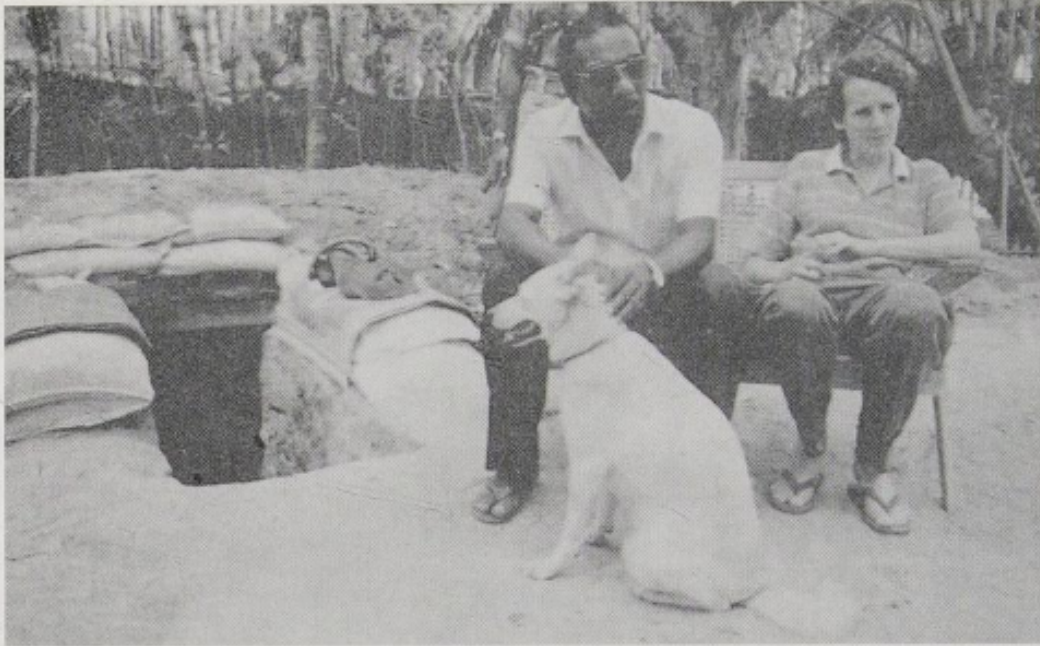
Bala and myself with Karikalan



Bala and myself with Karikalan, the political leader of the Eastern Province in Amparai, 1989.

Figure 19: Bala and myself with Karikalan, the political leader of the Eastern Province in Amparai, 1989.

Sitting outside our bunker with our dog Jimmy in Jaffna 1990.



Sitting outside our bunker with our dog Jimmy in Jaffna 1990.

Figure 20: Sitting outside our bunker with our dog Jimmy in Jaffna 1990.

Carrying a weapon for self-defence, 1991.



Carrying a weapon for self-defence, 1991.

Figure 21: Carrying a weapon for self-defence, 1991.

Discussing issues with the women fighters of the LTTE in Jaffna 1990.



Discussing issues with the women fighters of the LTTE in Jaffna 1990.

Figure 22: Discussing issues with the women fighters of the LTTE in Jaffna 1990.

Scraping coconut for a meal in Jaffna, 1993.



Scraping coconut for a meal in Jaffna, 1993.

At a meeting with Mr Thamil Chelvan, political wing leader of the LTTE, 1995.



Figure 24: At a meeting with Mr Thamil Chelvan, political wing leader of the LTTE, 1995.

Enjoying a meal with the senior leader Baby Subramaniam and his wife Vetti Chelvi, 1992.



Enjoying a meal with the senior leader Baby Subramaniam and his wife Vetti Chelvi, 1992.

Figure 25: Enjoying a meal with the senior leader Baby Subramaniam and his wife Vetti Chelvi, 1992.

At a wedding function in Mullaitivu with Mr. Pirabakaran and his wife, Mathy in late 1998.



Figure 26: At a wedding function in Mullaitivu with Mr. Pirabakaran and his wife, Mathy in late 1998.

Introduction

Though the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is internationally well known as the freedom movement spearheading the Tamil struggle for self-determination in Sri Lanka, less is known of the real nature and structure of the organisation and the calibre of its leadership. As is the case with the enormous suffering of the Tamil people. This lack of transparency can be attributed to the rigorous press censorship, ban on visitors to the war zone and the antipathy of the international media and the world governments. This opacity has provided unconstrained space for various analysts, experts and ‘scholars’ of insurrectionary warfare to distort, falsify and misrepresent the organisation as well as the Tamil struggle. The monstrous images and impressions that are deliberately constructed have also shrouded the truths behind the conflict. The aim of this book is to draw back the curtain of mystery and misrepresentation that hangs over the Tamil struggle and to tell the inside story, the true story, of the vicious oppression of a people and their violent resistance.

For more than two decades I have spent my life with the Tamil Tigers. My historical journey of involvement in the Tamil freedom struggle and my unique experiences over those years is set out in this book. This semi-autobiographical, historical sketch attempts to depict the life experiences, events and episodes as they unfolded, chronologically, in the evolutionary history and development of the Tamil armed resistance.

The opening pages of this work tells the story of how a young woman from a small, unknown village in Australia effects a radical rupture in her life when she leaves the shores of her country for an adventure in Europe. When I boarded the plane in Australia and headed for Europe thirty years ago, the probability that my life would undergo radical transformation was the farthest expectation from my mind. But it did, beyond anything anybody could possibly imagine. It went far beyond the simple matter of improving myself through travel and higher education in England. My worldview drastically changed. The greatest determinant in my life has been my husband, Anton Balasingham. Our marriage in 1978 was a union of ideological perspectives, values, aspirations and convictions. And since that time we have walked a revolutionary path together, united in the face of challenges and circumstances that few people could even imagine. And so the story of our extraordinary life together as active participants in the Tamil freedom struggle unfolds.

Following our initial induction into the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in London in 1978, we made a decisive step to travel to India to meet the organisation’s leaders and cadres. In Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, we met a young man, Vellupillai Pirabakaran, the founder of the Tiger movement, who, over more than two decades, has not only emerged as a legendary

figure, but has assumed the mantle of national leadership of his oppressed Tamil people. Our initial introduction to Mr. Pirabakaran and his cadres is dealt with in Chapter Two, where I also discuss the internal dynamics of the LTTE. The early history of the Tiger movement illustrates the difficulties and problems confronted by the leadership in building a small underground guerrilla organisation into a national liberation army capable of challenging the military might of the Sinhala state. Apart from the internal dynamics that brought about changes in the structure of the organisation, the external factors i.e. the objective conditions of state oppression, had its impact on the growth and expansion of the LTTE. The anti-Tamil racial conflagration of 1983, was a turning point in relations between the Tamil and Sinhala nations. It led to the collapse of Tamil parliamentary politics and the assumption of the armed struggle as the mode of political struggle. The intervention in the island's ethnic conflict by Sri Lanka's powerful neighbour, India, following the riots, had far reaching consequences. In Chapter Three I elaborate in detail, the manner in which the central government of India and the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Mr. MG Ramachandran intervened in the conflict. India's military training programme for Tamil militants and the Chief Minister's financial support to the Tigers in the mid 1980s provided an unprecedented impetus to the growth and development of the LTTE and the armed struggle. I have pointed out that the contradictions that arose between Delhi's interests and the aspirations of the Tamil militant organisations, ultimately led to mutual disillusionment. It became increasingly clear that India's involvement in the ethnic conflict pivoted on her own wider geo-political and strategic interests. Delhi's covert support for the Tamil militants was aimed at bringing Sri Lanka within the sphere of India's hegemony and to open up negotiations with the militant organisations. The famous 'Thimpu Talks held in Bhutan's capital between the Tamil representatives and the Sri Lankan delegation was the outcome of India's aggressive diplomacy in 1985. India's displeasure over the collapse of the talks led to Bala's deportation from India. He was invited to return to India to participate in further dialogues between the militant organisations and the Indian government. Three months after his return to Chennai a bomb exploded in our house in a failed assassination bid on Bala. The arrest of the culprit revealed that a Minister in the Sri Lankan government of Julius Jayawardene was behind this attack. In this chapter, I have also recorded events of harassment - by the central and state governments of India - of the Tamil Tigers that led to a progressive estrangement between Delhi and the LTTE.

There were escalating military confrontations between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces in the early part of 1987. Ultimately the Sri Lankan armed forces embarked on a massive invasion of the Jaffna peninsula resulting in heavy civilian casualties. India intervened to put a halt to the escalating hostilities. The Indo-Sri Lanka Accord was worked out between the two states. The LTTE was excluded from its formulation. Under the terms of the Accord, Indian troops were deployed in the Northeast of Sri Lanka under the guise of a 'peacekeeping' force to monitor cease-fire between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military forces and to oversee the de-commissioning of LTTE arms. The background to the developments is elaborated in Chapter Four. In this part of the work, I provide a detailed account of the tragic events that eventually culminated in an armed confrontation between the LTTE forces and the Indian army, known as the Indo-LTTE war of 1987-1990.

One of my central concerns in writing this book has been to convey to the world and to record for future reference, the scale and magnitude of the oppression that the Tamil people have been subjected to over the years. I have been uniquely placed in those tragic circumstances to record from my personal experiences and from the lived experiences of the witnesses of the terror and violence that was unleashed by the Indian occupation army on the civilians of Jaffna. Accounts of the atrocities committed by the Indian 'peace keeping' force the mass arrests, detention, torture, extra-judicial killings and the rape of Tamil women - have been, to some extent documented in the book. But apart from witnessing these horrendous events Bala and I became the very targets of a search and destroy operation by Indian troops. The story of the Indian army's hunt for us in Vadamarachchi, a sector in the Jaffna peninsula, is described in detail. For me, more important than the tribulations we endured, was the response of the people to our plight. During those months of fugitive existence, being hunted by the Indian troops, the Tamil people risked their lives to protect ours. I will always remember with gratitude the love, kindness and the magnanimous spirit shown by the people of Jaffna during those dangerous times. Without the support and spontaneous assistance of the Tamil people we would never have survived. The success of our escape across the Palk Strait to the Tamil Nadu shores was also another remarkable story of endurance of the human spirit. The horror of the ordeal of that ocean crossing in a small boat against enormous odds has also been depicted in that chapter.

Chapter Six of the book provides a comprehensive analysis of the Premadasa-LTTE peace negotiations. The Premadasa administration and the LTTE leadership had their own compulsions for entering into a negotiating process to ensure the withdrawal of the Indian army from Sri Lanka. The occupation of the Tamil homeland by the Indian forces escalated the war between the Tamil Tigers and the IPKF in the Northeast. The presence of the Indian army in the island had also precipitated insurrectionary violence in the South by the Janatha Vimukthi Perumuna (JVP). The entire island was plunged into violence and turbulence of an unprecedented scale. Both the leaders of the Tamil and Sinhala nations Mr. Pirabakaran and Mr. Premadasa wanted the Indian army withdrawn for specific interests of their people. These mutual interests brought the Tamil Tigers and the Premadasa Government to the negotiating table in Colombo. Bala played a crucial role as the accredited chief negotiator for the LTTE during the dialogue with the Sri Lankan delegation. I was fortunate enough to act as secretary to the LTTE's negotiating team. In that capacity I came to be acquainted with some of the extraordinary political personalities who were in the pinnacle of power at that historical conjuncture, i.e. Sri Lankan President Mr. Ranasinghe Premadasa and his chief negotiator Mr. A C S Hameed, the Foreign Minister Mr. Ranjan Wijeratne and others. The peace talks were cordial and constructive. They were successful in achieving the common objective of securing the withdrawal of the Indian troops. Following the de-induction of the IPKF, the efforts to resolve the ethnic conflict ran into serious difficulties when Mr. Premadasa showed no inclination to meet the pre-requisites of the LTTE to enter the political mainstream and to face elections. In this part of the book, I have elaborated in detail the various sessions of the talks with the Sri Lankan Ministers as well as the private deliberations we had with the President and with Mr. Hameed. This period of history with its unique events is documented

in depth and detail. I have also explained the causes for the collapse of the peace talks and the resumption of hostilities in the form of Eelam War II.

Following the de-induction of the Indian troops from the Northeast, Bala and I returned to live in Jaffna. Chapter Seven of the book concentrates on our experience of living with the Tamil people in the midst of a brutal war in the Peninsula during the first half of the nineties. This era was marked by major and decisive battles between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces for control of territories in the Jaffna peninsula. But the Sri Lankan armed forces did not confine the conflict to the battlefield. The war was deliberately extended to civilian areas with the intention of causing casualties and terror amongst the population. Blind aerial bombardment and indiscriminate artillery shelling in the heavily populated civilian areas caused havoc. I have elaborated, in this part of the book, the depth of the oppression faced by the people of Jaffna and the horror and nightmare they experienced during these dangerous times. While the war raged, the LTTE ran an effective administration in the peninsula and other areas under their control, a topic which I have commented on in this chapter.

For me, a sociologist, the Jaffna society was a new and open laboratory waiting to be researched and recorded. Almost every facet of social life called out to be researched and commented on. The women fighters of the Liberation Tigers had inducted a new dimension into the Tamil society. Their historical intervention in the lives of Tamil women had to be recorded and the impact on the society studied carefully. I wrote a book entitled *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers* in which I documented the early history of the women fighters. Cultural practices such as the dowrying of women assumed a social problem of enormous magnitude, particularly on the lives of Tamil women. The contradiction between the radical induction of women into the armed struggle and the ancient dowry system screamed out to be resolved. Having committed to the abolition of the dowry system, women cadres demanded action be taken by the LTTE leadership to implement their policies. The public debate on solutions to the dowry problem elicited interesting comments, which revealed that dowry practice was more complicated than it was presumed to be. The views of the public on the dowry system added to my interest in the subject. In my research on the topic at the Jaffna University library I learned of an ancient matrilineal system of property relations in the Jaffna social formation. I subsequently wrote a book entitled on the dowry practice amongst the Jaffna Tamils entitled *Unbroken Chains*. After writing the book I carried out some research into domestic violence.

When Chandrika Kumaratunga assumed office as the President of the country in 1994, the Tamil people anticipated respite from the war when the peace talks were held between the LTTE and her government. The few rounds of talks took place in the early part of 1994 and subsequently collapsed, paving the way for the outbreak of hostilities and invasion of the peninsula by the Sri Lankan state forces. We were living in Jaffna when Eelam War III erupted, and we survived their onslaught. In Chapter Seven I tell the story of how the Sri Lankan military forces launched their strategic plan to capture the peninsula and in that process subjected the Tamil people to death and destruction. The lethal potential of the firepower deployed by the Sri Lankan army indicated how callous and merciless was the Sinhala army in the pursuit of its military objectives. As the invading troops approached the Jaffna city,

a decision was made by the LTTE leadership to evacuate the population from Valigamam. A sea of five hundred thousand panic-stricken people choked the roads out of Jaffna to escape the advancing columns of Sri Lankan troops. The magnitude of this monumental human tragedy in the form of a huge exodus of the entire populace of Valigamam and their displaced existence in Chavakachcheri is also vividly documented in this chapter. I was one of those half a million people who vacated Valigamam; the only difference being I left before the rush, one day earlier.

The Sri Lankan army pushed on with its advance and we finally vacated the peninsula for refuge in the Vanni. The final chapter of the book deals with our life and that of the displaced people in Vanni. This period of history was dominated by military confrontations between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan army. The military forces attempted an ambitious military offensive code named 'Jayasukuru' aimed at capturing the A9 highway that ran through the centre of Vanni. The LTTE's effective resistance transformed this military campaign by the government forces into one of the longest and bloody battles in South Asian military history.

As a liberation organisation challenging the authority of the state, various critics have taken the LTTE to task on various issues. But one of the areas of the LTTE's expansion, which has raised many eyebrows, has been the induction of women into the armed struggle. One such critic is Radhika Coomaraswamy, the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Violence Against Women. In an article on LTTE women fighters in a Colombo newspaper, Ms. Coomaraswamy presented a thoroughly negative and distorted portrayal of the LTTE women. Asserting her position against violence she blamed the LTTE leadership for 'militarisation of Tamil society' by the induction of women into the armed resistance movement. Ms. Coomaraswamy criticises the women fighters as 'perpetrators of violence'. Characterising the female Tigers as 'armed virgins' she argues that their involvement in the armed liberation struggle is a radical departure from Tamil tradition and culture. In Chapter Seven I present a lengthy and systematic critique of her criticism. My central thesis is that women, as an integral component of the Tamil national formation, have the right to self-defence when confronted by genocide that threatens the annihilation of the social totality. By arguing that the mode of state oppression faced by the Tamil people is a subtle and sophisticated form of genocide, I criticise Ms. Coomaraswamy for deliberately neglecting the stark reality of the history of the state oppression against the Tamil people and their heroic resistance. I have also attempted to answer some of her other criticisms pertaining to feminist themes.

In the last chapter I have presented my impressions and perceptions about the LTTE leadership, particularly Mr. Pirabakaran and other senior cadres and field commanders who regularly visited us in our residence in Puthukuddiruppu, Mullaitivu. On the basis of our close relationship with Mr. Pirabakaran for more than twenty years I have attempted to portray his remarkable personality. I have also briefly sketched my observations of some of the senior military commanders who have now become war heroes of the Tamil resistance. This part of the book also deals with the episode of Bala falling seriously ill with acute renal failure and our efforts to evacuate him out of Vanni with the help of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Government of Norway. Commenting on this issue, I have also

revealed how President Chandrika Kumaratunga put forward unacceptable demands on the LTTE leadership as a price for Bala's life.

Though this work is grounded on personalised experiences, glimpses and observations of varieties of events and happenings it essentially dwells on the historical dynamics of liberation struggle. In this context, it can be assessed as a historical work, documenting events of a turbulent period in Tamil resistance. I am confident that the reader will find the book interesting because of its multi-faceted features, commentaries and revelations that are relevant for a deeper understanding of the Tamil struggle. One of the central aims of this book is to inject a realistic portrayal of the scope and depth of the state oppression to which the Tamil people are subjected to in Sri Lanka. The gravity of the oppression, which I have attempted to project as genocidal in intent, has not been fully understood or taken seriously by international humanitarian organisations and the world Governments. Ignoring the tyranny perpetrated by the racist state and the violations of human rights and atrocities committed by the Sinhalese army in the Tamil homeland, India and the western powers continue to refuse to recognise the genuine aspirations of the Tamil people for political independence.

Irrespective of the opposition to their struggle to realise their legitimate right to self-determination the people of Tamil Eelam are fiercely determined to continue with their political project against formidable odds. I have seen this indomitable spirit, the will to freedom amongst the fighters as well as the civilians in Tamil Eelam. I am convinced, beyond doubt, that this will to freedom will ultimately triumph.

1 New Horizons

I knew our departure was imminent. White frothy waters churned from the spinning blades of outboard motors. We were to be on our way, away from the land and the people I loved and had lived with for seventeen years. Tamil Tiger cadres - young women and men we knew, and many we did not - and old friends too, dotted the shoreline, waving us good bye. The motors cruised smoothly as they propelled us out of the blue of the coastal lagoon waters into the grey of the deepening India Ocean as the figures on the beach faded into the disappearing landscape. The landmass became a thin black line through my water-filled eyes. I was leaving part of me behind.

The ocean rushed to meet us and was not shy in intimating we had come at a bad time and life would be difficult for the next several hours. We were unwelcome guests in that watery terrain as the choppy waves threw us about in a display of obvious annoyance. Soosai, the Sea Tiger commander, took up an authoritative position at the rear of the boat enabling him to effectively direct this leg of our journey. I wondered in admiration at the obvious ease and smoothness with which Soosai and his crew steered through the turbulent waters. Sure-footed in a boat in a drunken sea, they got on with their duties of skilfully maintaining the motors and steering a course, unperturbed by the cold waters lashing the boat, drenching them all. The young cadres, with a dexterity and confidence beyond their years, moved in harmonious motion with the sea and the boat, defying the water threats and intimidation. As we looked in the direction indicated by Soosai, through the grey haze, we could see two black marks at a distance behind, but keeping pace with us. They were boats - LTTE boats- the same as the one we travelled in but diminished by distance, rocking and rolling as they ploughed their way, doggedly, through the Mullaitivu waters. These were our escorts; boats loaded with courage, sacrifice, and commitment and explosives too. These were the Black Sea Tiger cadres deployed for our security and prepared to give their lives so that we should live; young men and women primed to smash into and demolish the Sri Lankan naval boats the moment they appeared to threaten our journey. It was not for the first time I felt unworthy of the honour bestowed on us and humble at the extent of sacrifice people were capable of just to protect our lives. But I had known Soosai for many years and had absolute confidence that he was well informed on the threats posed by the Navy before our departure and was equally as capable of dealing with perilous situations. For Bala, there was an added danger to his life and this came from within himself.

Recently Bala had miraculously survived an episode of acute renal failure and was now in the chronic renal failure stage. That was the medical opinion of the doctors who had attended to him. Twenty-five years of diabetes had taken its toll they said, but the absence of any

diagnostic equipment precluded thorough investigation and explanation of the acute renal episode. It was only after surgery that we fully understood the degree of renal obstruction he was suffering on top of the chronic renal failure. Had we known his left kidney was the size of a coconut and on the verge of rupture we might not have had the courage to set out on a perilous sea journey without recourse to medical care and equipment.

Although Bala had recovered from a life-threatening episode of renal failure in Mullaitivu he remained extremely unwell and it was lady luck alone that could account for his survival, allowing him to undertake the lengthy sea journey across the Bay of Bengal. Malaria, typhoid, hepatitis, viral fevers, everyday illnesses in the Vanni, were dangerous enough for 'healthy' people, but were potential killers for Bala with a precarious renal ailment. So, with his illness on the one side and the dangers from the tropical environment on the other, the unanimous opinion expressed by all sections of the organisation and public who knew of Bala's rapidly failing health, was for us to leave the Vanni as soon as possible while he was still in a condition to travel. And so, in the midst of so much emotion and concern, Mr. Pirabakaran made the arrangements for our sea journey out of Tamil Eelam. We knew that such a journey held its own risks but there was no alternative. It was either stay in Mullaitivu and face death, or take a risky journey, and perhaps, with the proper medical care abroad, he might live longer. But once out in the ocean it didn't take too long for this inhospitable environment to plunge Bala into a crisis. As our small boat struggled on into the gigantic might of a mobilised sea and into the fading horizon light, his face became whiter and whiter. He began to feel unwell not long into our journey and the Sea Tiger cadres were already busy supporting his forehead as he heaved his stomach into their bowls. I too struggled with that horrible sinking feeling so characteristic of seasickness as my worst nightmares concerning the journey became a reality. I was well informed before our departure that I could be faced with three potential medical crises. Would his blood pressure drugs precipitate an attack of hypotension, which they not infrequently did at that time of the day? Would the vomiting from seasickness dehydrate him and provoke a renal crisis? Would intense vomiting precipitate an attack of hypoglycaemia? So when I looked up through my own nausea to see sweat beads gathering on his forehead I could not be sure which one of these conditions prevailed. A look at Bala's sheet white face told me he was in difficulty. The look on Soosai's face pleaded with me to do something. Bala held out his hand and pointed, indicating he felt hypoglycaemic and needed sugar and I struggled to drag some from a medical kit I had prepared. He licked this vital stuff and after a few minutes the beads from his forehead had dried up. That was all I could do. The unstable motion of the boat prevented even the simplest medical procedure. He lay back and rested against the side of the boat, but he was not at all well. When he swirled his hand in front of his forehead I knew he was feeling giddy and that his blood pressure must have dropped. A few minutes later he would be heaving his stomach out again and then flop back in exhaustion. His body was limp and resigned.

We pushed on with the journey torn between an expectation that Bala's condition would improve and stabilise with time and making the decision that he would not be able to continue, and we should turn back. The decision was made for us when it became obvious that the distance behind us was more than the distance ahead of us. We had to proceed; there was no

turning back. He knew there was nothing else that could be done. Soosai looked at me and the boys looked at each other. Soosai, desperate to do something, shouted at the driver to slow the boat for some time. "The naval gunboats have left Trincomalee", came the reply.

Disregarding the far off danger, Soosai shouted again "Slow the boat for some time". We pushed on into the deep-sea waters and darkening night adjusting the speed of the journey according to the weather conditions and Bala's obvious physical distress. Soosai never moved from his perch on the edge of the boat from where he scanned the sea and kept a vigil over Bala and guided the young cadres in direction and speed. Tireless and oblivious to the hostile environment which he and his cadres inhabited, and with the calmness which was characteristic of veterans of self sacrifice, Soosai and his crew worked like the organs of a body in harmony. Then, when I thought there would be no end to the nightmare, "There Auntie," said Soosai, leaning over to me, shouting above the noise of the motors and pointing to some flickering lights on the horizon, "We've arrived," he said, indicating the presence of a ship in the darkness. A short time later our cadres were struggling to moor our swaying boat by the side of a ship. The night was light again and the chatter of excited familiar voices broke the monotony of the breaking waves and a labouring motor. "Come Auntie, come," voices shouted at me as hands reached out for me to take hold of. Bala was already on board. Informed by walkie-talkie of his condition, a team of cadres descended onto our boat and hoisted Bala on board and whisked him off into a warm cabin where he was cleaned up and could lie down on a bed. The strength of youth hauled me on board where I found myself being shuffled into a small cabin. I felt as if I was entering a warm house after a cold night out in the rain. But I was feeling so ill with seasickness I could not lie down. I sat on a step with my head between my knees. Amidst my preoccupation with my own ghastly nausea and wandering what had happened to Bala, a voice found my ears. "Auntie", I could hear, "I'm going," I looked up to this voice and could see Soosai standing, leaning on one hand, and looking down at me. "Okay 'thamby' (young brother)," was all I could utter at that moment of saying farewell to a young man who had not only been a close and generous friend over the years, but, for the third time, had been instrumental in saving our lives. His face told me it was not necessary to say anymore and he turned and walked away, rallying his cadres to prepare for departure. One by one the boys we knew so well and who had cared for us and shared this stretch of the journey, came to bid us farewell as they hurried to prepare for their long and dangerous journey in the black night and rough seas to return to Mullaitivu before being intercepted by the Sri Lankan gun boats.

Soon after Soosai and his crew had safely distanced themselves from our ship on their return journey, I could feel a gentle motion. The ship was moving. We could barely hear the motor, and if it had not been for the gentle swaying like a baby in a cradle, I would not have known the ship had set off. The engines could obviously manage the sea, and was just as capable of handling the weight of this big boat. The crew was getting on with the task of transporting us on the second leg of our journey. Sudaroli, a senior Sea Tiger cadre, was given the responsibility of our care during the sea journey. When I enquired from Sudaroli the whereabouts of Bala and what was happening, "He's all right. Don't worry," came the voice of competency, "He's sleeping Auntie". Those words were reassuring enough for me and I gave into the warmth of

the bigger ship and escaped from the emotion of goodbyes and the anxiety of the journey I had just experienced, into sleep.

I don't know how long I had been in the refuge of sleep when, "Adele, can you get me a cup of tea?" came a plaintive voice, wakening me. I was both annoyed and relieved at this disturbance; annoyed that my temporary respite from seasickness and my worries about Bala had been disturbed, but happy to see that he had revived sufficiently to be able to get up and seek out food and fluids. Anyway, he drank down a hot cup of tea and was in good spirits, obviously responding to the warmth and the greater stability of the big ship. My tea swished around in my stomach before spasms of dry retching regurgitated it out onto the floor, warning me off food and fluids for the next few hours. And this horrid seasickness dogged me throughout this early stage of the journey. Now I was the sick one, barely able to move. On the bigger ship Bala quickly adjusted to the sea and we returned to maintaining his normal observations and care.

As the sun peeped over the horizon on the Bay of Bengal lighting up the sky with its golden rays of life and deepening the blue of the sea, we sailed to rendezvous with another ship, anchored for over a month in the deep, deep Indian Ocean, awaiting our arrival. Bad weather and even rougher seas had precluded our departure from Mullaitivu and the link up with the ship. Now, as we approached, the crew was waiting anxiously for us. I felt sorrow and admiration for our cadres manning this ship, for they had weathered the high seas of the Bay of Bengal for over a month and the stores and water supply were down to absolute minimum for the next and their final stage of this rescue mission. Any further delay in our departure would have created a supply crisis for the crew on board. So when we did finally rendezvous with them it was not without some relief on their part. Floating and drifting in the middle of one of the world's oceans, notorious for its potential for stormy weather, with nowhere to go and nothing to do, could not have been any fun. Nevertheless, in typical resilient fashion, the cadres on board seemed hale and hearty as they waved to us in greeting as we approached their huge ship. But as I looked around me across these vast stretches of water, I was overcome by a strange feeling that we are insignificant tiny entities in this boundless immensity.

As our ship attempted to snuggle up to the cargo vessel to enable us to transfer from one to the other, we were confronted by an unexpected problem. The sea was choppy and would not keep still. Fenders of the two swaying ships clashed against one another, the impact forcing a separation and a huge canyon like wedge between them, making it virtually impossible for a safe transfer from one to another. We all stood on the edge of the ship wondering and gazing at the danger and power of the waters some fifty feet below us, caught between these mighty pieces of iron made vessels as they clashed and vied with each other. It was impossible to attach a walk plank from one ship to the other; the instability of the ships would have pulled it down. Certainly we could not swing by rope from one ship to the other as the cadres did with ease. All sorts of scenarios filled my mind, as I wondered how Bala would summon up the energy and endure the strain of a leap. I could see him falling into the angry waters between the two ships or injuring himself in such away that other problems would arise. As the fenders of the two ships clashed and separated and they swayed and rolled like two stags

in a fight to the death, we pondered how to overcome this problem. We would have to jump, but when? All we could do was wait; wait for the moment of stillness and steadiness between the two ships, which would allow us to jump. "Throw Bala Anna, we'll catch him," said the concerned cadres on the cargo ship with outstretched arms. "Jump," they shouted, "we'll catch you". But a look at the turbulent waters between the two ships was enough to tell us that any mistake would lead to certain death and we had come too far to be hasty now. And so we waited to seize a moment of harmony between the sea and the ships and when it came, Bala, with the support of many strong muscles propelling him from behind, made that crucial leap and landed in the arms of the relieved cadres. The crews on both sides visibly relaxed once Bala had safely crossed the 'border', so to speak. All that remained now was for me and our escorts to cross over. The ships clashed and banged and moved up and down totally at the mercy of the enormous volume of water beneath them. "Come on Auntie, jump," they urged in voices which indicated a confidence that it wouldn't be a problem for me to manage. And it wasn't either. When the right moment came I hurled myself into the air, landing in the reliable clutches of the waiting Sea Tiger cadres.

Once on board this huge iron vessel we were quickly introduced to our accommodation. I was amazed at how small the crew's quarters were, in comparison with the size of the ship. But while it would not be too difficult to live in these claustrophobic conditions for a relatively short journey, I sympathised with the crew who had spent month after month in these pigeonholes without having touched land. It was amazing that they still retained their morale. Even a simple procedure such as cooking has to be in unison with the movement of the ship. Indeed, in very rough seas - as the crew explained to me- when the ship is brought to an almost vertical position to climb a huge wave only to slam down into its trough, cooking becomes impossible and it can be days before they taste a hot, cooked meal again. The very thought of travelling in such seas, with mountainous waves breaking over the bow of the ship, absolutely horrified me and I hoped we would not have to experience such conditions. Hours of contemplation on the deck, watching the timeless movement of the endless sea left me in awe at the phenomenal power and character of the ocean waters. Flying fish briskly skimming waves and plunging into the water and friendly dolphins escorting our ship, drove home the point that the sea was another fascinating life system on this planet where human beings are at best sojourners and at worst hostile interlopers.

The days rolled on and the ship rolled on too. While I spent much of my time engaged and entertained watching the sea, Bala, no longer troubled by sea sickness, quickly endeared himself to the crew and became a useful cards partner in the captain's cabin. Although Bala looked unwell during this stage of the journey, no major medical problems arose to cause any real concern. Since I was cut off from any medical advice throughout the journey, I breathed deeply when I started to see pieces of foam boxes, plastic bags and bottles floating on the water. The rubbish indicated that my anxiety and responsibility was drawing to an end, as our journey was more behind us than ahead.

The increasing amount of rubbish bobbing up and down on the sea and disturbing its pristine beauty made me aware that we were closing in on human society again. After many

years of living in the war-torn North-east of Sri Lanka, in a society full of want and with very few consumer items, I had lost touch with the environmental problems associated with over consumption and economic 'development'. Furthermore, the traditional elements in the household economy in the North were far more orientated towards thrifty and versatile use of natural products leaving limited scope for waste. For example, hunger and lack of finance were widespread, so there was no over consumption or waste of food. The few food scraps that were left over went to the natural scavengers: the crows. The electricity supply to the North had been cut off since the outbreak of war in 1990 so there was no necessity for people to keep buying new electrical gadgets and thereby the area was not confronted with the difficulty of disposing of mountains of plastic waste. But now, after years in the Jaffna Peninsula and the Northern jungles of Sri Lanka, cut off from the rest of the world, we were entering the territorial waters of one of the developing Tiger economies and the constantly increasing amounts of rubbish littering the seas indicated that the phenomenal material wealth and its concomitant hedonistic consumerism was obviously at the expense of any serious regard for the natural world.

Our ship was parked in international waters while we waited for the closing stage of this sea saga to get underway. The waters were now utterly still, shining like mirrors. We all were relaxed and happy that our mission had, so far, been successful. But it was not yet over. Arguably, the most dangerous stage of the journey was still ahead of us. A few days later a small fishing trawler sailed into our proximity and pulled up close to the ship in preparation to take us to the coast. We boarded the trawler and departed for our final destination still several hours ahead of us. Special sleeping arrangements were set up for Bala but he preferred to sit at the controls with the crew and watch the journey. We were all alert, watching for coast guard and navy patrols, for we had now moved - illegally - into the territorial waters of a foreign country and we aimed to avoid interception. After several hours of travelling towards land we were transferred to a speedboat which sped us to a small jetty. But it was ebb tide when we arrived in the middle of the night and we were unable to get close to land. We were aghast at this unexpected development when we were so close to reaching our destination. Although the waters were calm, the situation was not. We were floating hundreds of yards from the coast without permission to be there and without any valid legal documents should the coast guard or navy intercept and investigate us. Suddenly one of our cadres slide over the edge of the boat and into the water and disappeared, leaving our small boat drifting in the water. A short time later he re-appeared, rowing a dinghy towards us. With a lot of wobbling and balancing we transferred to the dinghy and proceeded towards land, looking for a place to berth. As we stood on that unknown land shortly after midnight, a four-wheel pick-up drove up beside us and whisked us away to safety. We had made it.

Meeting Balasingham

It all began when I married a Tamil man, Anton Balasingham, from the island of Sri Lanka, in 1978. In that union, I married the collective consciousness and history of a people: a

man who embodied the Tamil psyche with all its strengths and weaknesses, greatness and failings. That history took me to live in the society and culture of one of the world's oldest Eastern civilisations; in the land of the ancient historical origins of his people, Tamil Nadu, the Southern Dravidian state of India. For many years too I lived in his birthplace, Jaffna, the cultural capital of the Tamil people in the Northeastern part of Sri Lanka, otherwise known as Tamil Eelam. I became immersed in the trials and tribulations, joys and celebrations of a people in the throes of a struggle to survive against a sophisticated manifestation of genocide. Subsequently, for the past twenty-three years of my life I have been exposed to extraordinary and unique experiences. In the first place, I am the only foreign person who has lived with, shared and witnessed the people's horrendous experience of state oppression and attempted genocide, and the complex domains of their heroic, sustained and astoundingly ingenious resistance against what would appear to be insurmountable, will breaking odds. More than two decades of my life with the Tamil people has been an honour also, for two reasons. Firstly, to be witness to the growth and development of the organisation spearheading the struggle for the freedom of a people- the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam - and to share in and witness the phenomenal historical struggle and the incredible sacrifices made by the organisation's cadres. Secondly, and more importantly, this liberation movement, and the people as a whole trusted me, respected me and revealed to an 'outsider' their inner soul. That my experience with the Tamil people has been profound was probably best conveyed by a Tamil lady friend, who, in conversation under the coolness of the graceful limbs of a mango tree on her farm in Visvamadu, Vanni, suddenly referred to me as 'the white Tamil'.

When I met Balasingham and fell in love with him more than two decades ago, I could not even begin to imagine my life would unfold the way it did. Undeniably the very act of marrying a man from a socio-cultural environment, which is in virtual contradiction to my own, prescribed at least a different 'ordinary' marriage. So how did it come about that two people from two different cultures could meet on a common ground of marriage? It could not have been simply physical attraction: if that were so the relationship would not have been so intense and intimate. So what was it that united us and took me down such an extraordinary path with him?

Although Balasingham remains, in essence, the man I married all those years ago, time and circumstances have worked on him to make him the thinker and personality he is today. A quarter of a century ago, the man I married was what I would call a 'religious man'; a 'religious' man not in the sense of adhering to institutionalised religions and observing what he viewed as their primitive rituals and practices, but rather a man concerned with righteousness, goodness and humanism.

Bala, thirty six years of age when we first met, had read widely on Eastern philosophical thought, in particular Indian Vedanta philosophy, and he had taken a special interest in the teachings of the Buddha. Indeed, Buddhist philosophy fascinated him so much in his younger days that he visited Buddhist scholars in Sri Lanka for exploratory philosophical elucidations. He has also given talks on Buddhism in public forums. As a serious student of Buddhist philosophy, he became deeply disillusioned with the Sri Lankan brand of Buddhism, which, according to him, has been polluted and perverted by racist and chauvinist ideology. But

it was his experience of personal tragedy which evoked tremendous reflection, and brought him into confrontation with himself and the philosophies he had so passionately pursued. His concern for righteousness and goodness was literally put to the test when his first wife became extremely ill with chronic renal failure, ending with her requiring life sustaining haemodialysis. The emotional and mental strain of observing and caring for his beautiful young wife teetering on the brink of death by chronic disease invoked in Bala profound philosophical introspection about the self and the human world. The disintegration and transformation of the human form as a consequence of serious physical illness, and, most importantly, the constant confrontation with death made him reflect deeply on the meaning behind human existence. Unique experiences, and reflections on those experiences, made him a wise man and rooted him in the real world as a rationalist.

Furthermore, this was a morally challenging period in Bala's life and a test of his strength of character as he struggled to cope with severe economic hardship and meet the emotional and health needs of his terminally ill partner. The many socio-economic problems he faced and overcame throughout this chapter of his life stretched all dimensions of his being to capacity, and he ultimately came to view goodness and righteousness not as words culled from the pages of books or something indoctrinated into us, but rather, as a harmonised faculty of mind and action emanating from our essential being. Sadly, his wife succumbed to her illness after five years of haemodialysis; much of it carried out at home. It was during this highly demanding period his own mortality stared him in the face- diabetes was diagnosed. Subsequently, out of this exploration and reflection of the dynamics of the personal self came this rather unique personality which I could only describe as 'religious'. And it was this 'religious' type of personality I knew I had been hoping to find in a partner. But I prefer to use a different term and describe the man I met and who became my husband as what I called a 'real' human being. Bala was, when I met him, most things I hoped the man I married would be; mature, wise, mentally strong and most importantly, caring. By wise I did not mean an intellectual and by mentally strong I did not mean 'macho', overbearing or aggressive. I was hoping to meet that exceptional human being who is humble but not weak; who is simple but yet deep; who is assertive but not egoic; who is confident but not arrogant; who was generous; who is proud but not vain; a person who is not selfish and thoughtless. That was the man I met all those years ago, and I knew Balasingham was for me within a few weeks of our first meeting. A dimension of his 'religious' bent was a lack of concern for conventional lifestyles, saving, and all those other things that ordinary folks are supposed to do. This lack of concern for material security did, of course, put us into financial bankruptcy, but somehow or other Bala always managed what little money we had so that we lived to love and enjoy another day.

In his search for answers about life and truth, Bala also consumed volumes of works in the Western philosophical tradition. But one of the major influences which counter balanced his 'religious' leanings was Marxism and neo-Marxist thought, which he was well versed in, and about which he formulated his own many reservations and criticisms. That philosophy should 'change the world' was one of the aspects of Marxism which did appeal to him as opposed

to philosophy as the stuff of ivory tower intellectuals or as thought systems incomprehensible or unrealisable within the 'normal' human potential.

Bala, I would say, was walking the fine line between these two apparently contradictory philosophical conceptions concerning the way forward to an elevated humanity. On the one hand Eastern philosophy prioritised individual subjective transformation as an essential condition for the redemption of human beings, which he knew to be idealistic, and on the other hand, socialist thought, with its emphasis on political praxis through collective action, appeared to offer greater potential for real transformation in the human condition. In the interlude prior to his total immersion into revolutionary politics he attempted to marry this apparent division between subjective and objective approaches to human development by embarking on a difficult doctorate of philosophy thesis that involved a theoretical marriage between Marx and Freud. But the demands of the revolutionary politics of the national liberation struggle of his people constantly intervened in his research and teaching. A time came when he was compelled to choose between an academic life and revolutionary politics. He chose the latter for he viewed the cause of his people as just and to serve that cause was meaningful.

So it was this progressive and mature personality I loved. It was able to cope with and was instrumental in 'filling out' my somewhat immature and unrealised personality. Retrospectively, one of the most crucial contributions Bala made to the growth of my personality was to help me to learn to put my subtle feelings and emotions into precise words. Bala's wider intelligence and personal experience, including his psychoanalytic knowledge, teased out my inarticulated 'feelings' stifled by inhibitions and brought them into cognition. Subsequently, for the first time in my life I was able to reveal the deeper, 'secret' side of myself and relate on an intensely intimate, uninhibited level. This improved ability to manage language inevitably widened my potential and scope for relationships, writing and conversation.

And so my relationship with Bala deepened and generated happiness and contentment in me. Just being with him seemed to be all that was necessary and the restless, discontented person, immersed in a mundane world characterised by consumerism and materialism faded away to the priority of an enduring, intimate relationship with another human being. Our wedding on 1st September 1978 was a simple, uncomplicated, formal affair with the five-minute ceremony officiated by a bureaucrat at the registry office in Brixton, South London. This social obligation had been delayed by one week. We decided to marry and hoped to complete the formalities the following day but we didn't have the required amount of money for a 24 hours notice service; we did have enough for the next best thing: a one week booking. Apart from informing a few close friends and relatives, we didn't mention our forthcoming wedding to anyone. As far as I was concerned, the wedding was a private commitment between us. Nevertheless, in a community where nothing remains secret for very long, the story leaked and in the evening a crowd gathered, cooked a wedding dinner of hot goat meat curry with plenty of whisky to wash it down and kicked up their heels at a fairly rowdy party. My 'bridal' outfit constituted a brown corduroy skirt and printed blouse, which I rushed to purchase just two hours before the ceremony. In this marriage I was lucky enough to enter into a partnership with for want of

a better cliché my ‘soulmate’. I suppose it was this fundamental profound relationship which smoothed over the inevitable bumpy times in our relationship.

But marrying Balasingham is one thing; getting involved in a revolutionary struggle is another. I could have, had I been inclined after marriage, taken a different path and attempted to sway Bala in another direction. But I didn’t. So why did I opt for the political path and involvement in the Tamil people’s struggle? While it is true that in our early relationship Bala helped to ‘stabilise’ or ground me in a more serious world, I will never countenance any suggestion that I was simply a tabula rasa upon which ideas were neatly and indelibly scribed. Nor did I simply jump from London into India or Sri Lanka into circumstances beyond my comprehension, moved like a naive nymph who danced to the sweet chords plucked from the strings of her lover’s serenading harp; nor did I plunge from one mindset to another. My involvement in politics and the liberation struggle of the Tamil people involved a process of mental and emotional development and a transformation of ideas and thinking or, to be more precise, a process of personal growth. The burgeoning of my personality was certainly facilitated when I left the sheltered life behind me on the shores of Australia and entered into the ‘big’ world of England and Europe. Or, as far as I am concerned, when my mind started to break down its parochial resistance. Exposure to global humanity which one finds in England challenged my socialised self, fed me with new perceptions, lifestyles and thoughts and ultimately radicalised my views and my perception of the world. My husband contributed to this process, anchored me in unconventionality and provided me with an unfettered emotional security in a way that enriched my life more than I could possibly have imagined or expected.

My Roots in Australia

When my mother cradled and looked down lovingly on her first baby daughter on the night of 30th January 1950, in the local Warragul hospital in Australia, her greatest hopes would have been that my life would be happy and healthy, leading a good, normal life. I’m absolutely certain she could not have dreamt that this ‘little flower’ as she thought I reminded her of would ever have embraced such a life full of extraordinary experiences. My father would also not have anticipated that his daughter might adopt such a radically different path in life.

Warragul, a small town surrounded by exceptionally beautiful hilly scenery, sits snugly at the gateway of the Latrobe Valley in Gippsland, Victoria. My parents moved to this town from Bendigo, the gold mining area of Victoria, soon after their marriage over fifty years ago and my father started his working life on the railways. They produced three other children apart from me: Brent, my older brother, and my younger brother and sister, David and Lynley.

In the early years of their marriage, my parents, Betty Florence Stewart and Albert Bruce Wilby, struggled in the post second world war economy on Dad’s income to raise their four children and balance the family expenditure. Meeting the demands and needs of four growing children couldn’t have been easy on my father’s fortnightly wage, yet I have no memories of ever going without or being in want. Both my parents shared a common set of pre-welfare

state values, which upheld parental duty to provide for their children and hard work to realise such a responsibility. Economic independence was viewed as virtuous in family life and an accomplishment to be proud of. To achieve these objectives my father worked every day of his life till his retirement at the age of sixty. But while Dad worked and brought in a regular income to provide for his family, it was my mother who managed the bills and balanced the money to ensure that they were never in debt and we had sufficient food to eat. Only later, once the children were at school, did my mother move out into society and take up employment as a shop assistant in the town to augment the family income.

But apart from the shared values they brought to marriage and imparted to their children, my parents are two distinct personalities with their own perceptions and traits. But I think it would be fair to say that my father, a railway worker and strong trade unionist, was more politically orientated than my mother was. My father is remarkable for his sympathy with the oppressed and his Labour Party politics was representative of his strong advocacy of the rights of the working people. But while Dad has been more on the political side of life, my mother tended towards social and philosophical aspects of human existence. She has a passion for life, a passion to know and understand the human world and the meaning of life. While Dad sought to address the interests of the working masses and their political future, my Mum has been interested in the values and virtues of the development of the individual and the fullness of life. Perhaps it was the coming together of these two particular personalities that impacted on my mind, propelling me into circumstances, which ended up the way they did. But it is difficult to account for the life path of one child so disparate from the other siblings and family history. Perhaps it was the interaction of the complex tendencies of my parents that laid the foundation for the evolution and formation of my personality. Nevertheless, while my adult life marks a fundamental divergence from the path of my other family members and has some controversy surrounding it, my parents have never wavered in their support for my life choices and have demonstrated an admirable willingness to understand and sympathize with my involvement in the Tamil people's struggle for freedom.

My primary school years were spent uneventfully at the local state school, after which I moved on to the town's secondary school where I studied to 'O' level standard. The opportunity of tertiary education was not an option open to me. In Australia in the 60s there was no space for 'plodders' at university; one had to be either wealthy enough to pay for university education or brilliant enough to win a scholarship. I fitted into neither of these criteria. Instead, I went on to fulfil a passion that had pre-occupied me ever since I was a small child and which I considered to be my potential and 'station' in life. I entered the nursing profession. With hindsight, and the benefit of years of getting to understand myself better, I now realise that the nursing profession represented two themes in my personality which has followed me through life: one, a profound sympathy and empathy for any form of suffering, and secondly, a desire to continually grow as a human being. Entering the nursing profession not only satisfied my aspiration to work in a caring profession, but more importantly, it took me out of my small town life into a new world in the city. Nursing studies regardless of how limited - built on the knowledge bank I had when I finished secondary school. Nevertheless, as is the case with many people I suppose, had I the opportunity to do so again, nursing would not be the way in

which I would combine those two aspirations. I probably would have chosen a less subservient profession: perhaps law or one of the natural sciences concerned with earth and life on it.

So after three years of gruelling training as a nurse I had a qualification under my belt and I was very pleased and proud of my achievement. A year of midwifery training gave me my second nursing qualification: one more step up the ladder both professionally and personally. But with those two qualifications behind me at the age of twenty one, and no likelihood of marriage in the near future, I seemed to run out of things to do in Australia and I opted for the popular - and what would seem the inevitable option to travel abroad. So after some discussion with a friend, we made plans to move out of Australia. I made my plans with no idea that this young Aussie back-packer's trip to Europe would be a non- return ticket. And I can still remember the day I made that fateful leap into the world. So powerful were the emotions I experienced on the day of my departure from Australia I can feel them as intensely today as they were then. It was a hot, steamy day in late January and I was nearly to be twenty-two years old. I was nervous and could not eat. The good-bye was such an emotional farewell, one would think this first time traveller from Australia was heading to another planet rather than another country albeit on the other side of the planet. On board the plane I took up my allocated seat in the rear of the cabin. This meant that I would, to my dismay, be the last to be served food and drink, for since boarding the plane I felt an enormous emotional weight lift off my shoulders and a ravenous appetite overtook my brief anorexia before departure.

My decision to travel abroad turned out to be a watershed in my life and I never looked back and I have only visited Australia once since I left her shores nearly thirty years ago. Departing Australia closed the chapter on one stage of my life and paved the way for a fundamental transformation in my thinking and priorities. Plunged into the matrix of life and exposed to personalities from all over the world, I really had no choice but to face the challenges to my ideas, thinking and behaviour if I was to benefit from this wonderful and fabulous diversity of experience that was about to engulf me.

I travelled to London and around Europe with a couple of girl friends from Australia. I was fortunate enough not to meet or mix with many Australians during the entire period of my journeys throughout the continent and during my stay in England. I say fortunate, because this meant that I did not simply transpose my Australian culture and relationships from one setting to another, but rather I lived and worked amongst the local people of the countries I visited. For example, we had a flat in a high rise tower block and we nursed in a private paediatric cardiology unit in Rome. I later took up the post of nanny to four small Italian children - for a very brief period indeed! By living and working in European countries I was able to observe and participate in the cultural and linguistic life of people, as opposed to brief visits to purely tourist designations. When we were bankrupt we returned to England, saved a tidy sum of money from the more than satisfactory wages we received as agency nurses, and again zipped off for a Northern and central European tour. I lived this life for a couple of years until both my friends returned to Australia, leaving me to re-evaluate my future alone in London.

The few years of a gypsy's life was great experience for me and I would never have missed it for the world, but a time came where I felt I should move on; perhaps even study again. However, having not yet mastered my chronic lack of self-confidence and aware of my absence of formal 'A' levels, opting for degree, I thought, was a little too ambitious. Subsequently a year of primary health care studies was a possible option and this became the next small step on the ladder of my life. In reality, I was ideally suited for this community orientated health care programme. Nursing provided me with the basic medical knowledge and midwifery was a must, but my European travel had divested me of any estrangement I might feel towards people of other cultures and races and made me an ideal candidate for community work in a multi-cultural society. These qualifications and experience compensated for my absence of formal 'A' levels as qualifications for entry to academic studies and so I was accepted into South Bank University for study in primary health care. One year of study for a Diploma in Health Visiting equipped me with the training and skills to work outside hospital institutions in the community as a primary health care worker.

Allocated to a large geographical area that was home to a cross section of social classes and cultures, I was exposed to a multitude of complex and often intractable social problems. The institutional organisation of primary health care and the social issues I was compelled to deal with were interesting and challenging, but they also raised new questions in my mind. For example, I began to question the policies and priorities of government funding. I was critical of the efficiency of public services. I was not happy with the process and implications of writing reports on people and 'labelling' etc. In other words I began to question the whole 'system'. It would be in my interest, I believed, to clarify the questions I was asking and the issues I was thinking about if I had a deeper knowledge of the social structure. I felt I was not sufficiently knowledgeable about the dynamics of society. And so I plucked up the courage and decided to apply for a social science degree course. But my aspiration to gain more structured, sophisticated and in-depth knowledge of the social matrix were still constrained by my doubts about my ability to cope with the intellectual demands of a degree course. So when I was accepted on the Social Science Degree course at South Bank University I was thrilled that I was considered capable of undertaking the challenge of undergraduate academia. The prospect of entering a totally different social environment where knowledge was abundant and where I would have to apply myself intellectually-particularly at the age of twenty-seven - was a challenge I eagerly awaited.

The social science degree course at the South Bank was wide in scope and, in particular, the social theory was intellectually heavy stuff. We studied the microscopic and the macroscopic dimensions of society; we travelled back from the pre-industrial world to the 'post-capitalist' era; we surveyed the history of continents and countries from Africa to Asia and the Americas and we dealt in thoughts systems dwelling on the social construction of the individual psyche to the mass hysteria of Nazi Germany. The lecturers. represented all shades across the political spectrum but with the 'left-wingers' in predominance. In other words, the degree course gave me a substantial political and theoretical education and contributed enormously to greater understanding of the ways of the world. It was at the South Bank University I met Bala. He was working on his doctorate dissertation and engaged in part-time tutoring. I was in

the second year of the social science degree course. Our acquaintance at the University soon developed into an intimate love, culminating in marriage. Bala helped to sharpen my intellect and to comprehend the complex social theories. The college was also a hive of political activism with students from all over the world propagating or supporting one struggle or another, thereby exposing me to the different mechanisms of social and national oppression going on in the world. It was also the age of revolutions: Britain was wracked by the extreme left wing politics of trade union power and militancy; many Third World countries in Africa, central and South America waged national liberation struggles for freedom from the archaic institutions of colonialism and the economic rape of imperialism. Because of our inherent sympathy for the oppressed we actively participated in the rallies and meetings of the African National Congress (ANC), Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), South West African Peoples Organisation (SWAPO), East Timorese, the Eritreans, Sandinistas, Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), the El Salvadorians, Chileans etc. We worked with the Communist Party of Great Britain, marched for the freedom of Nelson Mandela, supported the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and were repulsed by the rise of racism in Britain. We invited people home for group discussions with the representatives from some of these liberation organisations. Feminism also 'set out' a lot of my own feelings of oppression and provided the words for me to articulate just how I felt and experienced my place as a woman in relationships and the world. It was this environment where my loosely defined tendencies gelled into a more coherent set of ideas; ideas which ultimately led to participation in an armed struggle of a third world country's national liberation movement.

Although we were both politically conscious and active throughout our academic years, our politics were essentially focused on international liberation struggles rather than domestic political issues. We never joined the British Labour Party nor did we have anything to do with its militant tendency. Working with the British Communist Party proved to be the least revolutionary option in British politics and fortunately our relationship was not deep and limited to a brief period of time only. The Soviet Union's support for the Sri Lanka Communist Party's opposition to the struggle for self-determination and political independence of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and the British Communist Party's allegiance and subservience to their Moscow masters were, in our view, reactionary, frustrating and politically incorrect. In British politics, the central issue that worried me was the rising tide of racism and fascism in England. I found it repulsive to watch the growth of a political movement that propagated an ideology of hatred towards other people and asserted a misplaced conception of being in some way superior to people different to themselves. Indeed this xenophobic environment impinged directly on my life and I had no appetite for it. I had to watch and tolerate as racism was perpetrated against Bala and many of his people in England. For example, a young Tamil man on his way to visit us was surrounded and beaten up by a group of young white thugs. He arrived at our door with blood spilling down his face and trembling in fear. He was so afraid to leave our flat and would only do so if we accompanied him to the tube station. I also had direct experience of racist threats. One evening we were sitting quietly at home talking to a friend in our high rise flat. A group of white racists attempted to break down the door and enter. Bala, our friend and myself repulsed the attack by pushing against the door to keep them out

and shouting at one another to call the police.

This confrontation with racism touched my sensitivity to injustice, violations of people's rights and the disrespect to people of different cultures. But while the experience of racism in Britain made me furious, Bala was not surprised by it and took it in his stride and compared it with the racism in his own country. But whereas the colour of skin was the basis upon which racist ideology emerged in Britain, illusions of ethnic supremacy formed the basis of racism perpetrated against Bala's people in Sri Lanka. Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist ideology, embedded in the mythology of a superior Aryan race and a pristine religion, was the foundation of racist practices in Sri Lanka. The Sinhala state has been the main perpetrator of racist crimes against the Tamil people. This racism has become genocidal in character with gross human rights violations in which more than 70,000 Tamils have now perished. As we have seen throughout history, the myth of superior race manifesting in the ideologies of fascism and chauvinism are dangerous, destructive and negative forces to be, in my view, fiercely resisted. Indeed I abhor chauvinist ideologies that stifle and oppress not only individuals, but nations of people also. I developed a deeper understanding and respect for people of all cultures from my travels in Europe and from my working experience with people in England from different races. Inevitably, I could not tolerate verbal or physical abuse of people on the basis of racism. As we look across the breadth of humanity, racism has played a crucial role in human history and has been a central divisive force and a source of inhumanity between people. It manifests in negative ideological perceptions of one people towards another based on dubious premises such as skin colour and spurious notions of superiority and inferiority, cultural differences, religion, history etc. As my experience in life has deepened, I have come to view the planet as the home of common humanity: the natural habitation of a single race -the human race- and other forms of life who have as much right to existence on this planet as you or me. Diversity of cultures enriches the human race since cultures express the spiritual development of humanity. In my view, all cultures on this planet should be respected and allowed to develop if peace, harmony and enrichment of life are to prevail.

Militant Politics

The history of the brutal and unjust oppression of the Tamil people by the Sinhala state since the independence of the island is well documented by international humanitarian organisations. The systematic oppression of the state over the years, does, in my observation, amount to attempted genocide though international Governments might refuse to accept this indictment. (I discuss the issue of genocide later) The oppression attacks the basic foundations of Tamil national identity i.e. its language, culture, economic life, and place of historical habitation. Added to this is the mass scale extermination of Tamil people during race riots and as a result of war. The dismemberment of the cohesion of the Tamil population by persistent and repetitive episodes of displacement is another genocidal factor. The sustained and brutal state oppression, from the outset, has inevitably evoked resistance. In the initial stages the Tamil people articulated their resistance to oppression through nonviolent political struggles based

on the pacifist philosophy of 'Ahimsa' as advocated by the guru of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi. The moral strength of non-violent resistance proved to be an ineffective, impotent force when confronting the coercive might of the Sinhala state which callously disregarded the spiritual and moral dimensions of non-violence. All peaceful protests by the Tamil populace were brutally crushed.

The abrogation of political pacts and agreements made between the leaders of the Tamil and Sinhala nations to resolve the escalating ethnic conflict deepened the climate of hostility and distrust between the two peoples. Indiscriminate arrests, systematic torture, disappearances and extra-judicial killings became part of the practices of the state's military forces. Furthermore, apart from the military occupation and domination of the Tamil areas, savage racist pogroms over the years, orchestrated by the state and executed by mobs of Sinhala thugs, resulted in the extermination of thousands and thousands of Tamil people. This mounting state oppression coupled with a growing frustration and lack of confidence amongst the Tamil people in the chauvinist Sinhala leadership presented the Tamil politicians with little option than to secede and create an independent Tamil state. The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), the Parliamentary political party of the Tamils in the general elections of 1977, sought a mandate from the Tamils to struggle for an independent state based on the right of self determination of the Tamil people. The TULF swept to victory in the Northeast, winning the majority of seats and gaining a popular mandate for a struggle towards political independence and statehood. But although the TULF had the people's mandate it lacked a coherent policy or strategy for the realisation of this popular political objective. Lacking in strategy and commitment to this mandated objective, the Party became inactive and impotent and ultimately sought the path of collaboration with the Sinhala ruling elites. This collaborationist approach severely and irrevocably disillusioned the rebellious young Tamils who demanded a radical strategy that would lead to the creation of an independent state. The Tamil youth, who bore the brunt of state violence and oppression, grew increasingly restless and cynical towards parliamentary politics and the impotency of non-violent political struggle. Both the objective and subjective conditions for the emergence of armed struggle in the Tamil cause for national freedom had now matured. A multitude of youth organisations committed to armed struggle for national liberation surfaced in the Northeast of Sri Lanka. The violence of the oppressor was now to be met with the violence of the oppressed.

Many of the liberation organisations in the Northeast had their supporters and campaigners in London. The support came essentially from the young generation of Tamils who had fled brutal persecution and racial discrimination in Sri Lanka. They retained bitter and painful memories of the experiences to which they had been subjected, a powerful identification with their oppressed people and an enduring emotional attachment to their homeland.

Our Tamil friends in London were all politically conscious people around this time of the late 70s. Most had come to London to escape discrimination and persecution, in one form or another, by the Sri Lankan state. The Tamil United Liberation Front's political mandate excited their aspirations and the anti-Tamil riots of 1977 following the general election kept Tamil politics alive in London. At the college, young Tamil students approached Bala on the

basis of national identity. They were all fiery and enthusiastic. One young man, Ganasekaran, encouraged Bala to use his journalistic and writing skills and his theoretical knowledge to write a political document. This Bala did and its wide circulation reached the LTTE circles in London. Mr. Krishnan, the LTTE representative in London in the mid 70s and Mr. R Ramachandran (alias Anton Raja) the official spokesman, visited our residence and introduced themselves. Mr. Ramachandran (we call him Ramasar) provided us with a detailed and authentic picture about the Liberation Tigers and their leadership. We were convinced of the courage, determination and commitment of the Tiger cadres. Our saga with the LTTE was underway. Ramasar has since become our life long friend and has been spokesman of the organisation in London. But, although we supported the LTTE our circle was wide, and supporters of all Tamil groups committed to armed struggle regularly visited our house. Bala held political classes for many young Tamil students from all the different organisations. We invited representatives from liberation organisations in other countries to come and address these classes also. They brought with them documentary films on the activities of their organisations, propaganda documents and posters. The Eritreans came with the history of their struggle; the East Timorese representatives narrated the genocidal oppression and atrocities committed by the Indonesian military regime; the African National Congress was twenty years away from victory and their representatives gave a talk on the struggle against apartheid; the Chilean underground representatives visited us and talked on the struggle against the military dictatorship of Pinochet, and so on. We collected funds for many of these organisations also.

But as much as the Tamils were politically active, so too was the Sinhala 'left'. The demand for a separate Tamil state opened up a controversial debate and the Sinhalese 'leftists' were confronted with the dilemma of wanting to remain 'radical' by supporting the socialist principle of a people's right to self-determination, yet at the same time opposing the right of the oppressed Tamils to secede. Bala was annoyed by this apparent theoretical confusion amongst 'leftist' Sinhala politicians and 'revolutionaries'. We decided to produce a document in response to this theoretical muddle. Bala painstakingly applied himself to this project and soon produced a cogent theoretical document, drawing on Marxist/Leninist framework to legitimise the Tamil people's right to self-determination. As he wrote, I typed, and we spent our education grant money on the printing of this document. It was released and distributed to the public with the title '*On the Tamil National Question*'. He followed this up with his second work in Tamil - 'Towards Socialist Tamil Eelam and it found its way to Mr. Vellupillai Pirabakaran, the leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Mr. Pirabakaran read the book and was impressed by the content and subsequently wanted to meet Bala. He invited us to Chennai in Tamil Nadu, India, where we met the leadership of the organisation for the first time.

2 Inside The Tigers' Den

When we left London for India in 1979, a new and fundamentally different chapter in my life opened up. Although neither of us ever expected that involvement in a liberation organisation and struggle would be an easy, we never anticipated the depth of complexity that we ultimately confronted. The intrigues of revolutionary politics as well as the socio-cultural milieu of South India generated new awareness within me and opened up new frontiers in my consciousness. This encounter with strange, extraordinary events, new relationships and challenges from the new environment constituted a memorable era in my life that radicalised my thinking and feelings, enriched my personality and made me a stronger human being. Certainly when I reflect on the years 1979-1987, the enormity of the task of rendering so many tumultuous events, both personally and politically, into a few pages of a book is an awesome enterprise. I can only offer glimpses of the era. It all began in the latter part of 1979.

The laying of one's freedom and life on the line in active participation in an armed revolutionary struggle is quite a different phenomenon to articulating subversive and revolutionary politics from the safety and security of thousands of miles away from the actual 'warfront'. So our departure for India and a meeting with the underground LTTE leadership and combatants signified a deepening of our commitment and participation in the liberation struggle. It was no longer armchair politics in democratic England, but rather we were setting out to meet fiery young rebels who were wanted by the Sri Lanka state for their radical new politics. The LTTE cadres had taken the people's struggle for freedom into the extra- Parliamentary sphere, onto the realm of armed struggle. At that historical time the LTTE cadres were actively engaged in small guerrilla operations against the state apparatuses the military forces and police. So we were getting involved in radical politics that had far reaching implications for the Tamil people, the cadres and ourselves. It was not a joke. Even though we had not personally taken up arms at that time, enjoying an intimate understanding and relationship with the guerrilla organisation's leadership, and trusted with the knowledge of the internal dynamics of the organisation put us in a position where we felt an enormous responsibility to the cadres and the struggle. Just having the 'inside' information on the structure of this rebel organisation and knowledge of the identities of the underground leaders placed us in a sensitive situation.

We arrived in Chennai, accompanied by Mr. Krishnan, for our meeting with the LTTE and its leader Mr. Pirabakaran, by flight via Mumbai. The LTTE cadres knew we were arriving on the night flight from Mumbai, but there was nobody at Meenambakkam Airport, Chennai, to openly meet us. This was our entry into underground politics and since that day, the politics of secrecy have become part of my life.

The indomitable Indira Gandhi was at the helm of India's affairs in 1979 on our first visit to Chennai. The patriarch of Tamil politics, Mr. Karunanidhi, was enjoying one of his terms as Chief Minister of the State of Tamil Nadu. As far back as then Tamil Nadu politics and Indian foreign policy were crucial and determining factors in the path of the Tamil Eelam people's struggle for freedom. In particular this dimension of Indian foreign policy has had its implications at the domestic, regional and international level.

India's foreign policy in the 70s and 80s was shaped by the international relations of the Cold War days and by the policies of the Non-Aligned Movement. Having been the founding father of the Non-Aligned Movement, India championed the ideals of neutrality and non-intervention to the nations of the Third World. But India's dream of constructing a New World Order free from the constraints of the competing super powers collapsed when China invaded her North-eastern borders in the early sixties. As the world's largest democracy and determined to assert herself as a world power and as a regional superpower, India felt threatened by the power configurations of the US-China-Pakistan axis in Asia. These security concerns compelled India to enter into a strategic partnership with the Soviet Union and to embark on a process to become a nuclear power by testing a nuclear bomb in the early seventies. Although she continued to argue in favor of non-alignment for Third World countries, India fell squarely within the Soviet camp. Furthermore, as a country subjected to centuries of exploitative colonial rule and having won a freedom struggle, India sympathised with and provided moral and political support to several oppressed nations engaged in liberation struggles. Subsequently, India became a foremost supporter of the African National Congress in its battle against the universally condemned apartheid system and of other African liberation struggles. India's consistent and effective support for the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) could have been nothing less than an enormous moral boost for the Palestinian people in a hostile politico-diplomatic world that viewed their struggle as 'terrorism'. But while India was out-spoken and generous in her moral and diplomatic support for liberation struggles in other continents or regions, she played out the game of regional politics in her own backyard with considerable political expediency and sagacity. The Tamil people's struggle is a case in point. India was well informed of the plight of the Sri Lankan Tamils and of the armed struggle by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Indeed Bala had written to Indira Gandhi on behalf of the LTTE as far back as 1978. Tamil Nadu politicians such as Mr. P Nedumaran had also briefed Mrs. Gandhi on the Tamil national struggle. Nevertheless, knowing all this, India confined her perturbation over the plight of the Tamils in statements expressing that rather innocuous and highly diplomatic term 'grave concern'. Just enough to warn the Sinhalese that India, as the regional superpower kept an eye on events in the island.

Ever sensitive and concerned not to incite or encourage secessionist tendencies within her own borders, India had no intention of offering support for the demands for a separate state being made by the Tamils in neighbouring Sri Lanka. Nor could she brush aside or underestimate the inflammatory and destabilising potential of sixty million Tamils on her Southern flank who clearly sympathised with their brethren 22 miles across the Palk Strait. Added to this was Indira's major concern about the Sri Lanka President J R Jayawardene's undisguised pro-Western position. She feared that the Sri Lankan leader was deliberately creating conditions

for US hegemonic domination in the Indian Ocean region, the geographical realm where India wanted to maintain its sphere of influence. A master in the art of political wizardry Indira Gandhi, while steadfastly recognising the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka, placated the Tamils by ‘tolerating’ the militants as a strategy to bring pressure on Colombo to return to Delhi’s fold. The overall objective would be to prevent Colombo from falling into the nexus of Western influence and bring it back into Delhi’s orbit. So in this geo-political scenario, many Tamils in the Northeast of Sri Lanka viewed Tamil Nadu as a safe haven. Few believed India would ever let them down. For the LTTE cadres it was not only a safe refuge but also a secure ‘base’: a place where they could live, organise and plan without fear. And that is why the LTTE cadres were in Madras in 1979. Enjoying the low profile patronage of Tamil Nadu politicians, the underground Sri Lankan Tamil insurgents found in Tamil Nadu a breathing space to survive. Nevertheless, confronted by problems caused by ‘enemies within’, the close surveillance of the various intelligence agencies, and the subversive activities of the Sri Lanka embassy in the state, the LTTE cadres functioned as a clandestine organisation in Tamil Nadu. It was into this scenario we arrived at Meenambakam Airport. These conditions explain why, while none of the cadres acknowledged us, two or three pairs of LTTE eyes, mingling with the crowds, clandestinely observed us and followed our every move until our eventual secret meeting.

A rickety black taxi rattled its way from Meenambakam Airport along the night streets of Chennai and delivered us to the entrance of a pre-designated ‘hotel’- or more precisely, lodge. Mr. Krishnan booked us into the lodge and left for an unknown destination to inform to the LTTE leader our whereabouts. This lodge was chosen, I can only guess, for its presumed inconspicuousness in a poor part of town. But that proved to be incorrect. Unused to the stifling Indian heat, we kept the windows in the rooms constantly open. The windows opening onto the main street offered passers by a liberal view of the guests. Indeed, so open was the room it was necessary for me to slip into the pokey bathroom to get some privacy for changing clothes. And the bathroom was a nightmare also. An incessantly dripping tap kept the dirty floor wet, making it impossible to change one’s clothes without dunking them in the dirt. But more seriously, a white woman with a Tamil man had made this room a voyeur’s paradise and we became objects of curiosity - and not for the right reason either. Given the general assumption - and by comparison for vast sections of Indians it is true that all westerners are rich, it would certainly have been difficult for the local people to understand why a Tamil man and a white woman should choose such shabby accommodation in a poorer part of town if they were not up to no good. When the LTTE cadres, including Mr. Pirabakaran, came to meet us in the middle of the night, I have no doubt this further titillated the already suspicious staff and the local population also.

Meeting Mr. Pirabakaran

I really had no idea of what to expect from the LTTE leaders when I first met them. Of course I knew of their militant revolutionary activities and I wholeheartedly supported their

armed resistance campaign. LTTE workers in London had told me that the central figure of the Tamil resistance movement, Mr. Vellupillai Pirabakaran, was indefatigably dominated by and committed to the political objective of the liberation of his oppressed people and that he firmly believed the establishment of a separate Tamil state as the final and only solution to the Tamil national question. That he had been a strict disciplinarian was legendary, even in those very early days. Indeed it was precisely his potential to enforce discipline which earned him his popularity and respect and set him apart from other fledgling leaders struggling to establish a guerrilla force capable of confronting the Sri Lankan state's military apparatus. But he was not a disciplinarian for the sake of it. He believed, and most military men would probably agree with him, that discipline was essential to morale and high performance of cadres. His high moral character, to the point of puritanism, was the other quality for which he was well known. Again, he views exemplary behaviour in personal life as a crucial factor if a leader is to retain authority. Neither of these traits of his personality and behaviour has waned over the years. Critics of Mr. Pirabakaran have often taken up these characteristics of his personality and accused him of authoritarianism. But I would go as far as to say that these two factors have been crucial to his sustained support amongst wider sections of the Tamil populace. Nevertheless, despite the steely reputation that preceded Mr. Pirabakaran, I discovered at our first meeting, a warm and concerned human being. "Thamby" - as those who are older or close to him affectionately address him - quickly understood the inadequacy of our accommodation and the discomfort and awkwardness of the situation I was subjected to. He promptly dispatched one of his cadres to find a 'better' hotel and we were moved out the next morning.

The first meeting with Mr. Pirabakaran (who was accompanied by one of the earliest LTTE cadres, Mr. Baby Subramaniam) took place in the middle of the night. We waited all day in our shabby little room sweating it out in the Chennai humidity before we met Mr. Pirabakaran. As naive novices to the underground game, we had no idea that we would have to wait till dark to meet him, nor did we expect that the meeting would be very late at night. But for Mr. Pirabakaran, a stickler for security, moving around under the cover of darkness had become a necessary habit. His attention to such problems as security was indicative too of the seriousness with which he viewed his commitment. That was okay with me. Given that he had been 'wanted' in Sri Lanka for the past seven years since the age of sixteen - and in a situation where interested parties would have no qualms in finishing off committed persons of liberation struggles such as he, it was fair enough for him to maintain his security. Clearly, the struggle was a serious matter for him.

Quietly and without any fanfare, late in the night, two young men appeared at the door, one dressed in the national dress of a white *verti* and the other in trousers and a light coloured printed shirt. I must admit that I was taken aback by how young and innocent these two 'terrorists' looked. Indeed their appearance belied their reputation. Both were short neat little men who looked like butter wouldn't melt in their mouths. Baby Subramaniam carried a bag full of all sorts of documents and political literature. This short, slightly stocky man in the national dress of a white *verti* and lugging a bulging, over stuffed bag or brief case which appeared too heavy for him to carry, became a trade mark image of Baby Subramaniam.

Mr. Pirabakaran was not so encumbered. His style was different. Meticulous grooming is Mr. Pirabakaran's hallmark. Dressing is an event for Mr. Pirabakaran, not a necessary practice to be completed and out of the way quickly. But Mr. Pirabakaran's young face was clear and bright and his huge black eyes penetrating. Indeed one gets the feeling that he is peering right through to your soul and it is this depth in his eyes, which mirrors his mind and thinking too. On several occasions in our long relationship Mr. Pirabakaran's eyes have told many stories. Only a careful observer would have noticed the bulge from the weapons they had tucked into their waists and covered by the shirts that hung loosely over them. Cleverly too, the buttons disguised a row of press studs sown underneath which allowed them to tear open their shirts, giving them easy and quick access to their weapons.

The first meeting between these two now historical figures whose lives became intertwined, Mr. Pirabakaran and Bala, was essentially a mutual sizing up exercise. One could see Mr. Pirabakaran scrutinising Bala's face. This rigorous facial scan by Mr. P's eyes is a common aspect in dialogue with him and there is a no way untruth or deceit can creep into a conversation when these probing eyes are watching every word.

The initial meeting was long, lasting for several hours from midnight till the early hours of the morning. Bala later conveyed to me how Mr. Pirabakaran queried his personal history and particularly his views about the Tamil armed resistance. 'Thamby' had already read Bala's political writing and his translations of Che Guevara and Mao Zedong on guerrilla warfare. But this was not enough to convince Mr. Pirabakaran of Bala's and my commitment. He wanted to know more about the people from London to assess their potential for real, genuine and enduring commitment to the struggle. Bala dwelled for some time trying to impress upon 'Thamby' the importance of political theory and practice to advance an armed revolutionary struggle. The meeting went off successfully. But although they liked each other from the outset, it took many years for both to cultivate a unique friendship based on profound mutual understanding. I too liked Mr. Pirabakaran and he didn't show any open suspicion of me. He was obviously concerned as to how to address me. In Tamil culture the titles Mr. and Mrs. are not generally used to address people. Titles of address are linked to social hierarchy and social and familial relationships. Since our relationship was not familial or familiar he couldn't address me as 'akka' (older sister) and at the same time he couldn't be so formal as to address me as Mrs. Balasingham. Since I was older than he was it would not be culturally correct to address me as an equal by using my Christian name either. 'Thamby' found a solution to his dilemma by christening me with the affectionate compromise and comprehensive title 'Auntie'. Apart from Bala and one or two others, Tamil people of all ages have come to know and address me as 'Auntie' many, I think, unaware of my real name.

Having been accommodated in a more 'comfortable' hotel after the initial meeting, 'Thamby' visited regularly with one or more cadres and dialogues would extend to long hours in the morning. 'Thamby' had much to tell Bala and Bala too had plenty to discuss with him. It was decided also that Bala should hold a session of political classes for the cadres in Tamil Nadu. The hotel was considered an unsatisfactory location for these classes since the numbers of young men coming and going would attract unnecessary attention and suspicion about

these ‘subversives’ from Sri Lanka. Subsequently it was arranged for the classes to be held in the private residential room of Mr Senjee Ramachandran at the Tamil Nadu Members of the Legislative Assembly living quarters. Indeed we eventually left the hotel room and were provided with accommodation in this MLA hostel. Mr Ramachandran was not the only strong supporter of the LTTE at that time. Member of the state government of Mr. Karunanidhi, the Agricultural Minister Mr. Kalimuttu was also a helper and we also met him during our stay there. The well known poet Pulamai Pithan, a distinguished man with his thick mounds of wavy, more white than black hair and a huge equally greying handlebar moustache, was also a strong supporter of the LTTE. We visited his home on a couple of occasions.

Well grounded in socio-political and psychological theories, Bala’s classes included expositions of contemporary national liberation struggles, elucidations of socialist theories and political concepts. He set out the distinction between the class system, which characterises Western social structure, and the caste system of South Asian societies such as India and Sri Lanka. The various conceptions of society’ as defined by Western social thinkers were also conveyed. The curiosity of some young cadres to know more about sexuality led Bala to hold a few sessions on basic Freudian theory.

Although many of the cadres had an inherent sympathy with socialist views, none of them ever articulated Marxist positions; neither did any of them ‘look’ like Marxist revolutionaries in the classical sense. None sported the long beard and scruffy dress which seemed to define the young ‘revolutionaries’ of, for example, the EPRLF etc. Indeed such an appearance was an anathema to Mr. Pirabakaran who, as I previously mentioned, is obsessive about cleanliness and good grooming and instils these standards in his cadres, particularly in his senior cadres whom he expects to set an example. The attention to hygiene and immaculate grooming is not only a concern of any military establishment, but is, undeniably, more rooted in reality than pretensions of being radical through scruffy laid back personal appearance. But more deeply than that, over the years we were to learn that Marxism had no real mass appeal in the Tamil social formation where religion, particularly Hinduism, has become a deeply entrenched ideology steeped in the socio-cultural life of the Tamil people. Bala introduced Marxism to LTTE cadres as primarily a social and political theory. Utilising Marxist concepts, he explained the armed struggle as the highest mode of political struggle. Yet, Marxism too has its inadequacies and limitations. Being an Euro-centred philosophy, it is an inappropriate theoretical tool to provide sufficient analysis to a fundamentally different socio-political environment. For example, it is difficult to embark on a socio-structural analysis of the caste-ridden Jaffna society using Marxist concepts. It is also difficult to utilise the categories of class in a social formation that is neither capitalist nor feudal; where there is no distinct class of bourgeoisie or feudal landlords but rather dominated by a middle class of high caste ‘Vellalas’. Furthermore, the Jaffna Tamils have their own belief systems and political instincts and no amount of theoretical analysis or persuasion will easily influence their thinking. In the early stages of its historical development, the LTTE adopted categories and concepts of the Marxist/Leninist thought systems to legitimise the armed struggle as a political struggle for self-determination. But later on, with the collapse of the communist system, the organisation abandoned Marxist thought and adopted social equalitarianism as the ideology of the movement. Undeniably

Tamil patriotic sentiments have been the driving force of the struggle.

Quite often during these discussions and classes I would slip out with one of the cadres to take in the sights of Chennai. India was a new experience for me and it was such a contrast to the western world I was passionate to observe and feel as much of it as I possibly could. Subsequently, over the many years I spent in India - or more specifically Tamil Nadu - I grew to love the country and its people. Had the opportunity arisen my preferred place of abode after I was compelled to leave the Northeast of Sri Lanka in 1999 would have been Chennai, as opposed to returning to London.

First Impressions of India

Throughout the years I was in India from 1979 to 1987 - I lived in a socio-cultural sphere that was antithetical to that of the Western world. The contrasts are vast and complex: documenting the disparities would be a book in itself. Here I can only offer a few glimpses. To begin with, in the wider context, the most immediate divergence between my western socialisation and life in Tamil Nadu rested on the fundamentals of social relations. Western social existence is premised on the individual, the nuclear family and privacy. In Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka also when I was there - any attempt to live an isolated, individual existence is doomed to utter failure and an absolutely incomprehensible aspiration for the people in these societies. Living a private life closeted behind four walls of a house, undisturbed, and with visitors by appointment, is an inconceivable ideal to the majority of people of Southern Asia. And this fundamentally divergent conception of social life was not only a mode of thinking I had to take on board, but also one I had to live with in reality. I can never forget a question asked by a young British journalist when she visited our house in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. By that time -around 1991- living in an open house with people around us all the time was so normal I had forgotten anything else. And so I was rather taken aback when she suddenly asked me how I coped with the lack of privacy. She was amazed at the number of people active in one way or another around the house. Our house was wide open and people known to us came and went at anytime during the day. Indeed, I doubt that our house in India was ever locked or empty of people. Linked to these social relations is the role society allocates to the individual. For example, motherhood invests women with a particular social role and status and she is expected to fulfil that role which, in turn, brings with it a network of social relations and authority. The oldest son is invested with a particular role and status with its obligations and responsibilities. Likewise, every individual enjoys a particular social role and status and it is from these roles, relationships emerge which also accounts for the constant social interaction between people. Indeed so complex and consuming are these social relations that little time is available for private concerns. Quite often the only time a husband and wife find time to discuss matters with one another is a few hours at night. Contributing to this generally more sociable environment is the extended family system that forms the basis of social relations in both Indian and Sri Lankan society.

In the Tamil social formation the extended family system remains the dominant family structure. Consequently, in most homes, apart from parents and their children, there will be a relative of some degree residing in the house with them. Elderly parents living with siblings or younger relatives residing with older brothers and sisters and their families, is very common. Nieces and nephews will come to stay and so on. The matriarchal elements in Tamil society mean that it is not uncommon for sisters to share houses also. For example, one sister and her family will occupy the ground floor of the house and another sister and her family will occupy the accommodation above. Eating times also are social occasions. Of course it is true that people are invited for meals and preparations are made accordingly, but it is equally true that food is seen as fundamental to human life as water, and to be shared in the same way. So, in this context, I had to transform my cooking habits from preparing food for a nuclear couple, into social cooking. And most women in Tamil society cook for more than is required for the family members. This means that women are able to offer food to visitors at whatever hour they should come. The offering and sharing of food at anytime of the day is a very important expression of the warm Tamil hospitality and women are essentially responsible for and involved in this socio-cultural practice. Furthermore, women often share food between themselves also. For example, rarely would a day pass without a friend or a neighbour sending a small amount of the food she had cooked for us to taste, or, if she cooked a dish she knew either of us liked, she would send some over for one of our meals. In village areas, the social relationships between women in the family and neighbours can be so close that they feel absolutely no inhibitions in asking a friend, relative or neighbour to prepare food for them while they are out. If they have unexpected visitors and there is insufficient food immediately available, they draw on the kitchen of neighbours or friends.

And another, perhaps more significant, divergence between the western life style and India, is the influence of society and family opinion as a powerful form of social constraint on individual behaviour. Social opinion can make or break the individual's reputation and by extension his or her future. This is particularly the case with women. The fear of social opinion is a powerful and effective form of social control of women.

The sheer numbers of people in India creates a contrasting situation to European life also. I doubt that a minute would ever pass without seeing another human being. Quite the opposite to, for example, England, where it is not uncommon not to see a fellow human being on the street. But in India, the preponderance of friendly and cultured humanity ensures that one never feels alone. So, surrounded by such a mass of humanity in such contrasting social conditions, Tamil Nadu was a place where all my emotions and senses were constantly alive. This feeling stemmed not only from the social relations, but also from the constant barrage on one's emotions evoked by the socio-economic conditions of existence of millions and millions of people. So overwhelming and glaring was the devastation to people's lives caused by poverty and so deeply did such suffering affect me, I would be making a mistake not to comment on it.

Undeniably my upbringing in the affluent West would explain why I was so taken aback by the living conditions of millions of people. So glaring and so frequent were the examples and

incidents of poverty, social exploitation, injustice and contradictions one would have to be blind not to observe them and insensitive not to be emotionally moved by them. And time never healed my outrage over the poverty and exploitation. Initially, during my first visits, I had the feeling that it wasn't real, that it would go away. But it never did; it was there all the time, gnawing at one's conscience and creeping into one's thoughts. A glimpse out of the aeroplane window on landing in Mumbai will reveal the story in an instant. The impressive oasis of skyscraper buildings will slowly recede to a seemingly endless fringe of shanties on its borders. Setting foot outside the airport too, dozens of pleading little hands will be reaching out to welcome you.

Another early encounter with my conscience took place when we were eating out at a very ordinary restaurant in Chennai. The privilege that I was enjoying was driven home to me when I saw the gaunt faces of three or four children peeping expectantly through the restaurant door they had boldly pushed ajar and were watching us eat hoping, presumably, for some leftovers to be given to them. Another phenomenon which never went away and which was always there to remind me of widespread social disadvantage and exploitation was the beggars in Chennai. Of course, being white made me a target for the begging community, so it was a common experience for me to have any number of beggars with outstretched hands trailing behind me and pleading 'amma', 'amma' (madam, madam), particularly when I shopped in the main streets of Chennai. It took a long time for me to overcome my embarrassment with people begging from me and I was concerned about how to handle this problem. Initially I felt uncomfortable about such scruffy looking and poor people pestering me. I had never before seen such poverty so close to me. Furthermore, because I was from the West I thought that most people would have assumed I had money, and I didn't wish to appear stingy if I refused to give a few piase. On the other hand, I didn't wish to be seen as a 'do-gooder' who didn't understand the system and therefore encouraged an industry which most of the society doesn't approve; an industry based on the exploitation of the very people we think we are giving to.

As far as I was concerned I was not on a crusade to abolish the practice of begging. I wanted to resolve the contradiction between the embarrassment I felt in the simple practice of walking down the street surrounded by people, and at the same time not wanting to reject the people and send them away with nothing. Initially I gave to everyone hoping that the beggars would disperse; it had the opposite outcome, creating a ripple effect with more beggars crowding around a soft touch. Since the practice of giving created the very conditions I was trying to avoid, I decided it best not to give anything to anyone, which the state's polity prefer, but that didn't work either: I was followed until I relented. So what to do in this confusing situation? I could not stop going shopping because of the unease I felt when surrounded by beggars, nor could I continuously dish out coins to a seemingly endless stream of them.

I thought hard about dealing with this obvious social problem. I realised that much of my embarrassment was caused not by the beggars themselves surrounding me, but by the fact that their presence drove home to me my own relative social privilege and good fortune in life and the reality and injustice of social inequalities staring me so closely in the face. So as opposed to viewing these children and women, the crippled and handicapped and the elderly

as a community of people harassing me and to be dismissed and rejected, I decided it best to resolve this conflict within me. I was aware that begging is an industry in itself and state governments discourage the practice, but as far as I was concerned the very fact that people either had no other alternative or considered such demeaning work as appropriate for them, was appalling in itself. Anyway, I had nothing to lose by giving a few paisas to these people. Having resolved that problem within myself I discovered that by giving them a few cents and asking them, in broken Tamil, to go away, they politely took the money and peacefully dispersed. So I adopted a policy of taking plenty of five paisa coins with me wherever I went and any beggar who approached me was given the token few cents and asked to go away; which they did.

Over the years I got used to the begging community and never side stepped or avoided a beggar coming in my direction or following me. But for me one of the most enduring symbols of poverty and oppression was the pot-bellied girl baby or child. Her skinny legs and arms, her haunted, sunken eyes peering from their sockets, and the dishevelled and matted brown black hair - so characteristic of malnourishment - hanging around her face as she sits woefully and listlessly on her mother's jutting out hip, was a pitiful sight. Whether or not the women are part of the begging industry is not the issue. The issue is the pathetic plight of the little girl. The preference for male children and the social injustices towards women in India is a widely known fact. So too is the deprivation of food for girl babies in favour of others or, when necessary, the need to have a malnourished child to evoke sympathy.

Problems Within the Organisation

Bala and I were able to establish a good rapport with the leaders and cadres of the LTTE. We were taken into their confidence to the extent of revealing some sensitive problems within the power relations of the organisation. During this period in the history of the LTTE the original nucleus of participants of the Tamil freedom movement were caught up in intrigues of power struggles and personality conflicts which led to its fragmentation, transformation and ultimate growth. A serious contradiction between the senior leaders and Uma Maheswaran, the Chairman of the Central Committee had erupted. A split within the organisation was imminent and Bala was called upon for his advice and counsel. An apparent cause of the crisis was a sexual affair relating to the violation of moral code of conduct of the organisation. The codes of conduct were viewed as crucial and essential to the discipline and integrity of the organisation to which the members had committed and subordinated themselves for the purpose of achieving the noble cause of liberating their oppressed people. Anyone who violated these moral codes was subject to disciplinary action. On this occasion, Uma Maheswaran, an unmarried man, was charged with having a sexual affair with the earliest female LTTE cadre, Urmila, a divorcee.

Both Uma and Urmila were originally youth wing leaders of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) who were inducted into the LTTE by Mr. Pirabakaran to promote the international

propaganda work of the organisation. Both of them, along with the other cadres, lived in a house in Chennai. The cadres had seen both Uma and Urmila in a sexually compromising position and reported the matter to the leadership. It was for this reason that Mr. Pirabakaran and other leaders were compelled to come from Jaffna and investigate the matter. Extra marital or premarital sexual activity was forbidden under the disciplinary rules of the organisation. A thorough inquiry into the allegations was carried out and Uma was called upon to marry Urmila, or resign from the Chairmanship of the Central Committee. Uma, a much more worldly man than the other cadres, vehemently denied the relationship and refused to resign his position, sparking a major crisis within the group. Urmila was equally adamant in her denial of the affair. Bala, who was called upon for his advice on the matter, discussed the issue with both Uma and Urmila. Bala felt the situation could be resolved if the couple admitted the affair and agreed to marry, perhaps at a later date. The couple continued to protest their innocence and the witnesses to the affair stuck to their side of the story. Ultimately, the majority judgement went against the couple's explanation and the Central Committee decided that Maheswaran should give up his position and resign from the organisation. Maheswaran categorically rejected the decision and the result was his estrangement from the organisation. We later learned that Uma Maheswaran and Urmila had returned to Vavuniya and that Urmila became seriously ill with hepatitis and died in Gandhi Illam, a charity organisation run by Dr. Rajasundaram.

Nevertheless, despite these deep organisational problems we returned to London with fond memories of our first visit to India. We knew too that while we had a good rapport and admiration for the LTTE leaders and cadres, a great deal of political work would be necessary to develop the organisation into a national liberation movement. But it was early days and 'big trees from small acorns grow'. We were not dispirited and we were prepared to labour on for the struggle, and, as far as we were concerned, the LTTE offered the best potential.

We actively worked for the organisation in London having communication with the leadership, and, two years later, in 1981, we returned to Chennai for the second time. Once again the organisation was confronted with serious problems. It was during this time that Mr. Pirabakaran formed an alliance with the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO). Sri Sabaratnam temporarily headed the TELO since its founding fathers, Thangathurai and Kuttimani had been arrested by the Sri Lankan military forces and jailed under the terms of the Terrorism Act in Sri Lanka. Subsequently, moves were afoot to bring the LTTE and TELO into a single organisational structure to strengthen and expand the armed resistance campaign. These initiatives to forge a unity were hampered by the sinister moves of Uma Maheswaran who claimed the leadership of the LTTE. Mr. Pirabakaran and his cadres, anxious to retain their history of armed combat under the banner of the LTTE, resented Maheswaran's unilateral assertion of the LTTE title. However, forming a new organisation by merging the LTTE and TELO at that time, would have facilitated Maheswaran to usurp LTTE's title and leadership. Senior leaders and cadres of the LTTE were not in favour of dismantling the organisation until Maheswaran's matter was resolved. It was agreed to delay the formation of the merged organisation and to strengthen both the LTTE and TELO while discrediting Maheswaran's claim. Sri Sabaratnam was not happy with the postponement of the merger but he understood the rationality

behind the decision. Subsequently, Bala and Baby Subramaniam launched an effective media campaign in Chennai disowning Uma Maheswara's false claim. In the meantime letters were sent to the LTTE supporters all over the world explaining the reason behind Uma's dismissal. Finally, Uma Maheswaran gave up his claim to LTTE's leadership and formed an independent militant organisation called PLOTE (People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam). But events have moved on and the LTTE-TELO alignment was not realised.

Learning More

While all this 'high' political drama was going on amongst the leadership during our 1981 visit, I engaged myself with the other colleagues. For this visit the cadres had rented a house at Varasalavaakkam, on the outskirts of Chennai and, despite the political intrigue that was going on, there was a great deal of camaraderie in the house. Staying with us were figures who, in one way or other, became historical names or important LTTE cadres. One was Baby Subramaniam (alias Ilam Kumaran), a life long compatriot of Pirabakaran. An expert in explosives and the mechanics of time bombs when he was a young cadre, Baby is, nevertheless, an extremely gentle character. Indeed, of all the cadres in the long history of the struggle Baby Subramaniam -most would agree - is a man who would never harm another through petty or vicious gossip or get involved in personal power struggles. Baby, an unassuming character, is, literally speaking, a walking encyclopedia of knowledge on the history of the struggle and the LTTE. A life long strict vegetarian he astounded me in the kitchen when he fried green chillies and then took five or six shallots to eat with rice as his main meal of the day. Despite his quirks he has remained an unwavering and most trusted member of the LTTE and an old friend.

Someone who remained a close friend but no longer an LTTE member was Nesan (Ravindran Ravithas), now a resident in a foreign country. Nesan, a clever young man who gave up his passion for medicine, dropped out of medical college to join Pirabakaran in struggle. Once a close confidante of Pirabakaran, having fallen out of favour, Nesan, unable to cope up with the complexity and intrigue of the internal dynamics of the organisation and more inclined towards spirituality, opted for a different, peaceful life style.

With us in those days too was Shankar, the first LTTE cadre to be martyred and on whose date of death the LTTE's day of remembrance and tribute to fallen cadres is celebrated Heroes' Day, November 27th. Shankar was shot in the abdomen by the Sri Lankan army during a round up of the house he was staying in 1982. He was taken to India for treatment, but a delay in his receiving proper medical care resulted in peritonitis and septicaemia and he succumbed to his injury. I found it extremely difficult to reconcile his death with the fine athletic young man I used to watch striding in as he returned from his daily running exercise when we were in Chennai in 1981. His death drove home to me that armed struggle meant that young people were going to die. Ragu, for many years Pirabakaran's bodyguard and trusted lieutenant, shared the responsibility for Pirabakaran's security in those Chennai days

with his boyhood friend Shankar. Many years later Ragu violated the rules and was expelled from the organisation. And the third member of this troika of village and boyhood friends was Pandithar.

When I went to Chennai I couldn't speak a word of Tamil and Pandithar had absolutely no knowledge of English. Nevertheless, we seemed to strike up rapport and were able to communicate quite adequately with a little bit of expressive hand language and laughter. But whenever I think of Pandithar I am reminded of a young man heaving with asthma. Hardly a day went by when the dust of India or the chilli fumes from cooking didn't choke Pandithar's respiratory system. But he was undeterred by this obvious physical discomfort and refused to allow the disease to constrain his political activities. He died before I ever had the occasion to meet him in Jaffna. Nevertheless, I can well imagine him huffing and puffing as he pushed his cycle from one place to another during those dangerous days when he was a wanted man as head of the Jaffna district political section of the LTTE. And it was a sad day for me when I learned of his death in Atchuvely, Jaffna in January 1985. Indeed it took quite some days for Mr. Pirabakaran to inform me of Pandithar's death. Perhaps he felt I would be distressed by the sad news. I had been informed of the army round up of his underground cell following betrayal by an army infiltrator into his ranks in Jaffna. During the round up of his house, so I was told, only one or two people had escaped and they were waiting for news of Pandithar's whereabouts. The discomfort of Mr. Pirabakaran and his vagueness of information made me suspicious about the full story and I had my doubts that Pandithar had escaped the round up. As the leader of the LTTE group and a trusted and fond colleague of Pirabakaran, his whereabouts would have been first to be known about. I was correct in my suspicions and a few days later Baby Subramaniam came to our flat and told me that he had indeed been killed. The army informant escaped and was last heard of as a corporal or some other rank in the Sri Lankan army. Pandithar was one of the earliest LTTE cadres to die. Fortunately he had traveled to Chennai to visit us just a few months before his death. When I visited his home in Valveti in 1987 I was amazed to see the emotional pain his mother had endured. Locked up and untouched since the time of his death, his mother had made a tomb out of his room as a memory of her son's life. A photo of him occupied centre stage of the entrance to his very poor room. We were all in tears during the visit.

Of the TELO cadres staying with us was Sri Sabaratnam who later became its leader. A quiet man, Sri was with us for political and strategic reasons only. Sri had embraced the well-known Valvettiturai rebels, Thangathurai and Kuttimani of the TELO, as his political leaders and was planning their escape from Welikade jail following their arrest in the Northern seas of Sri Lanka. Not a brilliant military strategist himself and with even less military experience, Sri knew from where he could acquire the necessary skills he required for such a dangerous military mission. Pirabakaran's military planning abilities, and the proven courage of Tiger cadres to execute any strategy, were vital to him. Bala's intervention dissuaded Pirabakaran from embarking on what was obviously a dangerous suicidal mission for both him and his cadres. Obviously the plan was never realised. But politics and scheming apart, Sri was extremely kind to us, particularly during an incident when Bala was seriously ill with a very high fever and diarrhoea. Bala was unable to walk so Sri carried him in his arms to the

vehicle we had called to transport him to hospital and then from the car into the doctor's office. Unfortunately, complicated contradictions in politics and personalities prevented a closer relationship with Sri, but we never had any personal animosity towards him and I was glad to see him again when we met, briefly, at the LTTE political office where he came for a political meeting with Bala in Chennai in 1985. He was subsequently killed in a shoot out during the brutal internecine warfare between the LTTE and TELO.

Although the number of young men who could actually be called LTTE cadres was very few in 1981, Mr. Pirabakaran exhibited his style of leadership, organisational methods, emphasis on discipline etc. even amongst the few cadres. Nevertheless, absent were the years of experience to come, and as a small group we could easily wear the label 'innocent'. So, regardless of the positions, roles and functions given of the members there were elements of equalitarianism, sincerity in relationships and expressions of fondness amongst us in Varasalavaakkam. As is the case in most houses, the kitchen was the meeting place, and eating was a shared joy. Bala, Pandithar, Shankar, Ragu, Baby, Nesan and myself could often be found laughing and joking as we collectively cooked for everyone. Bala would cut the fish and then sit on the sack of rice in the corner of the room and tell jokes; by the nature of the laughter from the cadres they must have been dirty jokes. I would peel the annoying small onions; Nesan would squat on the ground and scrape the coconut; Pandithar sweated it out and puffed over the kerosene cookers in his role as the chief cook; Ragu would finely cut the vegetables according to Pandithar's instructions and so would Shankar. Sri would sometimes assume the role of chief meat cook and prepare his specialty. Pirabakaran too would join in the bonhomie often cooking his favourite chicken curry dish. But while this all sounds normal stuff it was in fact a manifestation of Mr. Pirabakaran's training of his cadres. Pirabakaran had instilled in all his cadres the necessity of each one of them being competent in cooking as a fundamental requirement of a guerrilla fighter. This included Mr. Pirabakaran also. Once the laborious task of cooking and cleaning up was completed and everyone had washed and freshened up, we would spread the mats out on the floor and all sat round, crossed legged, and shared and relished the meal. All the cadres, including Mr. Pirabakaran, who really enjoys delicious, tasty food, were competent cooks. But Pandithar, by mutual agreement, was the best.

For us to eat it was not only necessary to cook, but to shop first. Unlike the West, where food is bought in bulk and stored in refrigerators, in India it is necessary to purchase fresh fish, meat and vegetables on a daily basis. So it was not unusual to see Mr. and Mrs. Balasingham, Pandithar and anyone else who wanted to come, heading off in the hot mid morning Indian sun, to the market. Leisurely we strolled the kilometer or more to the bus stop and waited. With the sight of the big, clumsy grey - green bus lumbering down the road one of us would step out and wave it to a halt. Not used to what seemed like a three feet high step up, Bala and I would clamber onto the bus and take a seat in the open windowed vehicle. A forty-five minute journey and numerous stops on the way through the inner rural areas would bring us to Per Oor local market and its masses of people. Constrained by a budget of ten rupees per person per day Bala, with his keen eye and sharp bargaining, would unburden Pandithar of the responsibility of choosing the freshest fish for the best price.

The afternoon heat in Tamil Nadu forgives anyone who wishes to lay low and avoid it. So except for those compelled by one necessity or another, most people choose shelter - usually a nap - as the best option from the burning afternoon sun. While we napped, Pandithar, despite his very basic knowledge of mathematics, would sit, every day, painstakingly counting and recounting the funds, adding and subtracting the organisation's accounts and balancing his budget and books.

But once the fierceness of the daylight sun wanes and turns from a shimmering inferno into a benign crimson magnificence overseeing us all, refreshed energy springs up ready to enjoy the cool of the evening. And so off to the cinema we would all go including Mr. Pirabakaran-joining the throngs of people heading in the same direction. While Tamil cinema is the main source of and most popular entertainment in Tamil Nadu, it is popular more for the fantasy than for the content it projects. The beautiful and handsome film stars and the subtle sexual suggestion in a sexually repressed society excite the fantasies and mesmerize the population and draw millions of people to the box office. Mr. Pirabakaran, as well as his cadres, preferred English films particularly war films. But if we didn't go to the cinema we would all sit upstairs on the flat top roof of a typical Indian house. And here we would enjoy the most wonderful display of the unknown. Cloudless skies permitted a glimpse into infinity by revealing countless numbers of stars reminding us of just how small we are in the universe and how little we know. And for those not interested in philosophical speculation, Bala would amuse the cadres with his witty answers to their curiosities about the more intimate aspects of life. Playing cards, another interest among Tamil men, was banned by Mr. Pirabakaran, but Bala, a keen player in his youthful years, could easily coax the enthusiastic cadres into a clandestine game if Mr. Pirabakaran was out of the house. If he returned unexpectedly Thamby would laugh, jokingly castigate Bala for encouraging the boys down the wrong road, and join in.

As I previously mentioned, the budget in the organisation was tight. Ten rupees per day per person were spent on food. The cadres were allowed two changes of clothes per person. New clothes were bought twice a year. Pocket money for cinema once a week was given to everyone. Smoking and drinking has always been prohibited for the cadres in the organisation so money was never wasted on that expenditure. But the movement was generous with me. I was what in Tamil is called a 'chella pullai', or, in English 'a favoured child'. And so this fondness was expressed by taking me shopping to buy saris or whatever I wanted. Bala was decked out with new glasses and fondness was expressed by showing concern for his greying hair and encouraging him to dye it, which he conceded too. Overspending on the food budget and occasionally eating out were also ways in which care for us was expressed. That was okay for Mr. Pirabakaran whose favourite pastime is trying out all types of food: particularly foreign food.

It was during this visit I was introduced to and started to live with weapons. When I became involved with the LTTE and armed struggle for national freedom I knew that I would have to put my life in jeopardy. There cannot be total commitment to an armed struggle unless one understands and is prepared for the possibility of losing his or her life. So when I started to handle weapons I considered it as a necessary part of the struggle and I viewed weapons

as a necessity for self-defense and an instrument for liberation. Indeed, in the Tamil struggle, the weapons are vital for self- defense. Pirabakaran, Ragu, Pandithar, Shankar and Baby all carried revolver pistols with them for security purposes; but they had their 'big' guns too. So it was decided to give 'Auntie' some target practice; but first the weapons had to be recovered from their hidden place. Pandithar and Ragu went off to retrieve them and at our rendezvous point I could see these two innocent looking young men strolling along, nonchalantly, with two very long newspaper wrapped parcels dangling in their hands. These parcels were the 'well-concealed' weapons and I laughed to myself. I wondered how people would react if they knew that two wanted 'terrorists' were carrying automatic rifles on their way to target practice just a few miles out of Chennai.

We traveled a few miles Southward out of Chennai to the coastal area, and there in a young cypress tree plantation the target was set up and I was instructed in the art of shooting. Pirabakaran instructed and demonstrated to me, how to use the revolver. He then handed me the weapon. I, of course, felt clumsy handling it but I thought I should learn how to use it as a part of participation in the struggle. I aimed and hit the target at least once out of six shots. We then turned to the automatic rifle and that was an awesome experience. The power of the recoil nearly made me drop the weapon. Using the weapon didn't bother me, but anyone who has handled a rifle will immediately feel its potential for destruction. Weapons, big or small, are exactly as they are meant to be deadly. But what I learned from this exercise was not so much my respect for weapons, but the cost involved in a few minutes practice and the privilege I had been subjected to. The six rounds that I had fired off so easily was at the rate of 25 rupees a bullet and, in those days, extremely rare items. In the early stages of the growth of the movement, shooting practice for LTTE cadres was at the rate of about one or two rounds a week and the procurement of a simple revolver was greeted with much celebration. Consequently, there was great discipline in this exercise. Because of the scarcity of ammunition, the cadres used every session of target practice to the optimum trying to achieve maximum accuracy with every shot. The outcome of this constant shortage of ammunition and the difficulty in procuring weapons and fresh supplies of ammunition was the instillation in the cadres of a sense of responsibility and value for the weapon and this remains one of the cardinal principles of the LTTE. But over the years the weapon has become more highly valued since it is well known that many cadres have sacrificed their lives in the battlefield to acquire weapons for the expansion of the struggle. Indeed the weapon was then, and remains so even more today, synonymous with the struggle, the freedom of the people and the sacrifice of the cadres. Furthermore, Mr. Pirabakaran, a man who has an interest in guns and an excellent marksman himself, has also been acutely aware of the lethal potential of weapons and has inculcated strict procedures and discipline into his cadres when handling them. The death of a cadre through misfire reinforces the rules and procedures they are expected to maintain when handling weaponry. So living with weapons came to be part of my life. When I returned to Chennai in 1983, I was the first woman to carry a weapon after Mr. Pirabakaran presented me with a SIG Sauer pistol for both Bala's and my self-defense. I carried the pistol in my handbag everywhere I went. Ultimately, years later, carrying an automatic rifle and sleeping with one in my room became the norm. And I was always grateful to have one at my disposal.

Several other historical LTTE cadres were in Tamil Nadu during the time of our visit in 1981. Mathaya (Mahendrarajah), the ill fated Deputy Leader of the LTTE, who was executed for treason in 1994, also spent a few days with us. Indeed it was rather praiseworthy circumstances which brought him there. The family of one of the LTTE helpers was being held under house arrest in Jaffna by the Sri Lankan army. Mathaya was courageous enough to help the family a woman and her four children to escape from under the noses of the army and brought them across the seas and delivered them safely to her husband in Chennai. Mathaya's stay was very brief and I did not have the opportunity to get deeply acquainted with him at that time to understand his personality. He was soft spoken, reserved and engaged in lengthy conversations with Pirabakaran, probably over issues in Tamil Eelam. In later years also, I was never as close to him as I was with other leaders and cadres. This had more to do with opportunity than political or personal differences. But he was always courteous to me during his frequent visits to our house to see Bala.

Another legendary figure from the early days was the indomitable and gregarious Kittu. We first met him at the LTTE camp in Madurai during our 1981 visit to India. Somewhat of a prankster in his youthful days, Kittu delighted in outraging the local population and challenging their conservatism. He donned the sacred white thread of the Brahmins, went to a restaurant, ordered goat meat curry and fried chicken and ate it with great relish while the astonished vegetarian community looked on disapprovingly. But Kittu was undeniably a young man of tremendous leadership ability. His command of the military campaign in Jaffna from 1983-1987 earned him the reputation amongst his people of both a courageous guerrilla fighter and clever strategist. His charismatic personality enabled him to combine both rigid discipline with congeniality. But I remember Kittu most of all for his unabashed and passionate love of his cadres, people and homeland. Indeed when Kittu came to visit us in Chennai in 1985 he came with a plan to take Bala and myself back to Jaffna with him where he thought he could both protect us and show me around his much loved Jaffna. The hundred thousand or so people who turned out for his memorial service in his home town of Velvettiturai following his tragic death at the hands of the Indian navy in 1993, was not only a tribute but a testimony of the widespread appeal and support for this real son of the soil. Ponnammam, another trusted Lieutenant of Pirabakaran, was in Madurai with Kittu in 1981. A gentle character, Ponnammam was highly respected and much loved by the cadres of the movement. Ponnammam was in the first batch of cadres to be militarily trained by India in 1983 and was responsible for establishing the training camps in Tamil Nadu. He was killed in an accidental explosion in Jaffna.

Final Decisions

On our return to London we were endowed with the unique distinction of having met and lived with the legendary Mr. Pirabakaran and the LTTE guerrilla fighters. In London, we waited expectantly for the day we would return to either Chennai or perhaps even Jaffna. After our visit to India we were not only totally politically committed, but emotionally committed

also and we preferred to be directly involved 'in the field' as opposed to speculative, armchair politics thousands of miles away from the battlefield. We kept contact with the organisation and continued our political work in London while Bala slogged on half heartedly with a thesis that he now viewed as abstract theorising and of little use to anyone. I returned to earn an income by working night duty as a nurse in one of the big London hospitals. Living with the expectancy that we would one day soon return to either India or Sri Lanka sustained me, for I was physically and emotionally tired of nursing. I had several professional and academic qualifications under my belt nursing was the basic one so it was not very encouraging not to be utilising or building on them. The only advantage nursing gave me was the freedom to choose my own time. Other than that, the profession had become a real slog for me.

Apart from this professional limbo I found myself in, I had to give some thought to my biological clock also. Producing children had not seriously entered into my mind for many years. Of course, as a teenager and young woman I talked and fantasized about having children, but to be very frank, the older I became, the less I viewed motherhood as an option for me, or more precisely, I did not even think of it let alone consider it. But at the age of thirty-one, married for three years and on the brink of throwing everything in and involving in an armed struggle, I thought I should examine all my options, including motherhood. The cadres in Chennai were curious as to why I hadn't conceived; but that was understandable. In Tamil culture marriage is followed up rapidly by pregnancy and motherhood. Women are expected to produce a child within the first two years of marriage. Most women have their first child within the first year of marriage. The production of children consolidates the relationship of an arranged marriage couple and creates a family situation, which compounds them in mutual responsibilities which are not easy to walk away from if the relationship isn't as compatible as either would like it. But my objective in marriage was not to produce children. Indeed I married to gain social acceptability of living with the man I loved. I didn't marry to have children and start a family life. In fact I was taken aback when I realised just how deeply entrenched people's attachment to established life styles are. I had presumed the world to be more 'progressive' in its toleration of different lifestyles but one learns how entrenched social views are only when one steps outside them. I could tolerate the queries about my having children from the cadres when we were in Chennai. Their queries reflected their cultural conception of marriage and womanhood. They would view choosing not to have children as a rationalisation for infertility. In England I came face to face with the hegemony of motherhood on several occasions from colleagues. Some women thought me in someway lacking for not jumping on to the bandwagon of motherhood. But others were out rightly hostile. Even before I had made the final decision, I well remember an occasion when four or five of us were sitting around at work talking about children. When I said I didn't have any, one of the colleagues, supported by a few others, jumped up and accused me of selfishness and greediness for working and saving money rather than producing children. Of course they had no way of knowing that we were bankrupt and I certainly would not have been working at night if we weren't.

This tyranny of the reproducers quite took me aback and compelled me to think about how I was perceived by people and whether in fact their criticisms were justifiable. But in the end their criticisms had no impact on my decision. Indeed long before that incident the glorification

of pregnancy, labor and delivery had been slightly fractured by my work experience. As a young woman of twenty-one I really enjoyed practicing as a midwife, but pregnancy, labor, confinement and all that maternal stuff had little attraction for me. As a health visitor, observing women staying at home constantly pre-occupied with their children, didn't appeal to me very much at all. I really thought there must be more to one's life. Perhaps, had I married at around the age of twenty-two or twenty-three it would have been different, but when I married my life was taking off. I had entered the university at the age of twenty-seven, during which time I never even thought about having children, and then into a different world altogether with my entry into politics. To put it bluntly, I was very happy with my husband, feeling pretty good about myself and, for me, most importantly, I felt free and I could not imagine tying myself to one or two children when, it seemed, the whole world was open to me. By this time my mind had moved a million miles and I aspired for a life beyond a personal family life: or to put it more frankly, my consciousness was more concerned about the oppressed and the poor and I wanted to do something in those areas. I had read widely on women in national liberation struggles and liberation struggles in general, I was reasonably politicised and I felt my life could be best spent in the service of people worse of than me; oppressed people, the poor and so on.

I was fortunate to find a man who not only shared my views but also was in a situation to realise our aspirations. He too was not concerned about producing progeny, but the ultimate decision not to have children was mine. And I have never regretted it. Indeed, as I have learned over the years, one of my most cherished principles in life has been my personal freedom and, in different ways, as I have grown older I find I have become freer. One path to freedom is the shedding or absence of emotional attachments and not having children has freed me of enormous emotional baggage. But having said that I would never presume to impose my view or advocate my lifestyle on anyone. In my perception the right to choose and the control of reproductive potential are women's fundamental rights and essential for a widening of the scope of decision women can make about their lives. Furthermore, I would never presume to denigrate women who choose motherhood. Not only would it bring me into confrontation with 99% of womanhood (which I wouldn't want) it would send out many wrong signals about my views. Advocating childlessness as a choice for woman would seem to imply a denial of the delightfulness and endearment of children and the obvious joy children bring to people's lives and society in general. Beyond that it would undermine the enormous respect and wonder I have over creation. No. Producing children is fundamental to human survival and social life so women need to produce children; and they should have children and a family life if they want that for themselves. But it was not what I wanted and, in the same way as I respect their decision to have children, I expect people, even if they furiously disagree with me, to at least respect my right to choose.

The Waiting Period

Our involvement with the Tamil struggle and our trips to India to meet LTTE leaders brought us into contact with different Tamil groups in London. We knew almost all the young generation espousing the cause of a separate Tamil state. Included in this crowd were London representatives of Eelam People's Revolutionary Front (EPRLF), People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO). We knew of the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS). Then, as now, they all held different ideologies with different conceptions of the conduction of the struggle or the armed struggle. They were critical of the LTTE for one reason or another. The main criticism they leveled against of the LTTE was its total commitment to armed struggle at the cost of politics. But time has proven that these critics were better at talking politics than organising an effective national movement for national freedom. It is only recently some of the militant organisations have realised the futility of collaborating with the Sinhala state and have become more sympathetic to the LTTE's cause.

Although I have no personal dislike of any of these armchair revolutionaries I am amazed that we wasted so much talk on these empty vessels now languishing around London in various stages of moral and emotional decay. But pretentious revolutionaries with over inflated egos were not the only people aspiring to be involved in the struggle of their people. The LTTE, in my experience, has a way of attracting some of the most committed, dedicated and decent young men and women into its ranks. This was true in London and it was certainly true in Chennai and Sri Lanka.

Of the London crowd, two young men who were regular visitors to our house returned to Sri Lanka and became popular and historic figures in the history of the LTTE. One was Ratna who later became better known as Murali. A young man driven abroad in search of greener pastures where he could work safely and earn some money for his poor family, Ratna never really settled in London and yearned to return home. And so he did. A few months after the anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka in 1983 Ratna followed us to Chennai where we had been since August 1983. He returned to Jaffna and became the first organiser of the Student Organisation of the Liberation Tigers (SOLT) in Jaffna. He was one of those lucky people who quickly made friends and endeared himself to the people and he was successful in mobilising the students in Jaffna for the struggle. Ratna was one of the first LTTE cadres to die in battle at Kopay, on the forward defence lines resisting the Indian army advance into Jaffna town. The other cadre who returned to Jaffna to participate in the struggle was Baheen.

Baheen travelled with us when we returned to Chennai during the tumultuous upheaval of the anti-Tamil riots. The riots made Baheen distraught and I have very vivid memories of him sitting next to Ratna on the floor of our London flat, crying his eyes out and begging us to take him with us when we returned to Chennai in the next few days. Nothing could not console him, nor would he take no for an answer. In the end we conceded to his pleadings. But we had one problem with Baheen. Baheen had overstayed in England and his passport had expired. To overcome this problem some of his friends clumsily altered the expiry date on his passport.

When we passed through immigration at Heathrow airport Bala and myself went ahead of Baheen and waited for him to follow. With great nervousness we watched as Baheen handed over his passport to the not so friendly immigration officer. He scrutinised the passport and flicked through the pages looking up occasionally at Baheen. Baheen, desperate that nothing should obstruct his departure, was nonchalant. A sharp immigration officer would have easily noticed that the passport had been tampered with, but I suppose he thought that keeping this fellow in custody was more costly than letting him leave the country, so he waved Baheen on. We sighed with relief once he was through and headed off happily, with some smugness too, to board the plane for Chennai. In Chennai Baheen immediately set about getting himself physically fit and kept pestering everyone to send him to Jaffna. So eventually, happily he went back to his village in Velvettiturai. But it was not long before he was gone, forever. Baheen was one of several young men taken into custody during an army round up Valavettiturai. Unable to escape, Baheen bit into his cyanide capsule and became the first LITE cadre to commit suicide.

It was during this 'waiting' period before 1983 I read a great deal. One of our greatest simple pleasures was to spend time in a bookshop browsing and buying books. Quite unconsciously I chose books written by women or I found myself in shops looking at books with female authors. I was an admirer of Doris Lessing's writing and of Doris Lessing herself; in particular her potential to identify what is wrong and to make decisions to change her life and live the way she wants to, regardless of the personal emotional pain or the pain of others. Elizabeth Croll's writing on women in China, in particular her book *Feminism and Socialism in China*, which gives an interesting account of the women's movement in China and where she deals with the conflict of interests between women's struggle and social struggle and the emergent problems for women in socialist society, was certainly a great read. *Women and State Socialism: Sex Inequality in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia* by Alena Heitlinger is self-explanatory and also extremely informative and thought provoking. Susan Brownmiller's work on rape, *Against Our Will*, became a great classic. Ann Oakley's sociological studies on women were always interesting. The books *Sandino's Daughters*, *Third World Second Sex* and many others setting out the triumphs and adversities of women in struggle, were books for us to identify with and feel inspired by. It all seems along time ago: certainly yesterday's book are a different reality in struggle.

Having read a fairly extensive list of books to the point of a research project - I started to flirt with the notion of writing. Much more confident than my younger days I set out to sum up women in struggle's experience in a small book for women in Tamil Eelam interested in participating in the struggle. There is so much commonality of problems between women all over the world and I wanted the women to share in and feel solidarity with other women in struggle. But before I could get into a book the anti-Tamil riots intervened and we returned to Chennai in August 1983. I left all my reference material in London and took only a few notes, which finally became the small book entitled *Women and Revolution*.

The Turning Point: Black July 1983

The violent events that exploded in Sri Lanka during July 1983 in the form of anti-Tamil racial riots brought about tumultuous changes in the Tamil political struggle. Though there had been periodic anti-Tamil pogroms since 1958, the racial holocaust of July 1983 was the worst in Sri Lankan history for its cruelty, brutality and savagery. Anti-Tamil riots rocked the entire island and the historical hatred of the Sinhalese erupted into volcanic violence bringing death and destruction on an unprecedented scale. Several thousand defenseless Tamil civilians were butchered by the rampaging, bloodthirsty mobs. The inhumanity of the Sinhalese, the genocidal intent of the riots, the violent fury of racism shocked the conscience of the civilized world. This racial upheaval made the Sinhala nation the sick man of South Asia.

This explosion of racial hatred was the response of the Sinhalese to a guerrilla attack that took place in the northern town of Jaffna. On the 23rd July 1983, a commando guerrilla unit of the LTTE under the direct command of Mr. Pirabakaran ambushed an army convoy at Tirunelveli, Jaffna, killing thirteen soldiers on the spot. As far as the LTTE was concerned, it was a successful guerrilla operation. For the Sinhala government it was a humiliating military debacle. This was the first time the Sri Lanka army had suffered heavy casualties. The Jayawardene Government was furious. The Sinhala media highlighted the incident, writing inflammatory reports igniting communal passions among the Sinhalese. The government announced a state funeral for the fallen troops on the following day of the incident. The event was slated as a day of 'national mourning'. But the Sinhala politicians, the Buddhist priests, the police and armed forces had a different agenda, a secret agenda. For them it was a day to avenge the dead soldiers.

The state funeral of the 'fallen heroes' turned into state sponsored mass violence against the Tamil people. Rampaging mobs led by politicians and priests (Buddhist monks) aided and abetted by the police and army stormed Tamil houses, shops, buildings and businesses and plundered the property and murdered the defenseless Tamils. Those who led the unruly mobs had precise information of the Tamil residences and properties. Most of them operated with voter's lists to identify the Tamil houses. It was impossible for those who lived in Colombo and in the South among the Sinhalese to escape identification. There were unspeakable horrors. Innocent Tamils were beaten and hacked to death. Hundreds of them were burnt alive. While the Tamil victims cried in agony the Sinhala rioters danced in ecstasy. In one incident in Colombo a group of foreign tourists were terror stricken and sickened as they watched a mini-bus load of Tamils being burnt alive while the Sinhala mobs were dancing in a mad frenzy. For forty-eight hours the Government maintained a calculated silence, allowing time for the violent mobs to avenge the dead soldiers. Those prominent politicians who masterminded the carnage ensured not only the mass killing of the Tamils, but also widespread destruction of Tamil property, annihilating the economic base of the Tamil business elite in Colombo. On 26th July, when President Jayawardene finally declared curfew, colossal damage had been done to life and property of the Tamil people. Even the Tamil political detainees in the Welikade

prison were brutally attacked and thirty five perished on the 25th July; a horrendous massacre that occurred with the collusion of the prison officers.

Black July of 1983 left a deep scar in the soul of the Tamil nation. The Tamils felt that co-existence between the two nations was impossible. The event gave new momentum to the Tamil struggle for self-determination and political independence. The enactment of the Sixth Amendment of the constitution soon after the anti-Tamil riots forced the moderate Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) to abandon Parliamentary politics and to seek refuge in Tamil Nadu. The doors of constitutional politics were closed to the Tamils. Armed struggle for self-determination became the only viable alternative. Thus, the ugly events of July 1983 marked a turning point in the history of the Tamil political struggle effecting a transition from democratic parliamentary politics to a revolutionary armed resistance campaign.

When the shocking news of the riots in Colombo and elsewhere in Southern Sri Lanka reached London, the entire Tamil community was thrown into a state of agitated anxiety. Everybody scurried for information of what was happening. Panic-stricken people desperately tried to contact their families in Sri Lanka. But most of all the people were outraged and furious. Ironically, a brutal racist outburst, which was set in motion with the objective of teaching the Tamils a lesson for articulating or aspiring for their rights and aimed at cowing them, had the opposite effect. The racial holocaust ignited the dignity and pride of a people in national solidarity against a common enemy, and exacerbated the conditions the Sinhala politicians had been trying to crush. The pogroms drove a deep, irreconcilable wedge between the two people's and entrenched and escalated the struggle of the Tamil people for political independence in a liberated Tamil state.

Friends and colleagues were coming and going to our flat throughout this emotionally charged period of the riots. LTTE workers from Europe hurried to London for consultation on what to do next. Fund raising for armed struggle was stepped up and LTTE supporters and new converts to Eelam gave generously. It was a time when many Tamil expatriates who had, for some-time, been sitting on the fence, now got off and took sides. For many, the riots were convincing evidence of the impossibility of living in security amongst the Sinhalese. Mr. Pirabakaran sent an urgent message requesting us to return to Chennai. We sorted out our personal matters in preparation for the possibility that we would never return to London, packed our bags and departed for Chennai. Nearly twelve hours later, we landed in Chennai where hundreds of thousands of people were out on the streets in shows of support and solidarity for the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Our lives were never to be the same again.

3 Turbulent Times in India

Baby Subramaniam, clad in a scruffy white verti, brown shirt and with a dark shadow on his face, was waiting to meet us at the Meenambakam Airport, Chennai in August 1983. His dishevelled appearance was not, this time, a reflection of his personal neglect. but rather the emotions he had been enduring and the intense activity he had been engaged in for the weeks prior to our arrival. Tamil Nadu was electrified by the anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka and politicians of all shades had been leading mass demonstrations and protests against the Sinhala state. Masses of humanity choked Chennai streets; black flags fluttered from buildings and car bonnets; Dravidian sympathisers in symbolic black shirts were out in strength.

Because we had to be accommodated in the Woodlands Hotel on our arrival in Chennai, we suspected that the LTTE was not well established in Tamil Nadu. As we were to learn, not even a political office had been set up. And, as old friends came to see us - in particular Nesan - our suspicions were confirmed. It emerged that there were only a few cadres scattered throughout Tamil Nadu engaged in political activity, mostly low key. Indeed, only a skeleton cadreship was staying in Tamil Nadu. Mr. Pirabakaran had taken most of the cadres back to Jaffna with him.

This situation had potentially far reaching implications for the LTTE. The anti-Tamil riots had generated a flurry of high level politico-diplomatic activity in both Tamil Nadu and Delhi. All the other militant organisations - TELO, PLOTE, EPRLF and EROS had established contacts with the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), Mrs Gandhi's personal intelligence agency, and were involved in a military training project.

The scale of the violence perpetrated against the Tamils during the riots of 1983 and the upsurge of emotion in Tamil Nadu as a consequence of the callous response of the Sri Lanka President Jayawardene to the outrageous events raging throughout his country, provided the justification for Delhi to take a more active role in disciplining its recalcitrant neighbour. Delhi opted for a two pronged strategy of diplomacy and military pressure to deal with the most violent and protracted ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka. Whereas the diplomacy would be high profile and transparent, the military strategy would be covert. Mrs. Gandhi did not opt for a direct military invasion as she did in Bangladesh, fearing it may provoke a hostile reaction in the Western world as a serious infringement on the sovereignty of Sri Lanka. The military pressure had to be brought to bear by the Tamil militant organisations through the intensification of their armed resistance. India's strategy was to assist the Tamil resistance movement by providing military training and arms. This had to be done in a most clandestine manner without arousing any suspicion of India's covert intervention. The ultimate strategic

objective was to bring Sri Lanka within India's sphere of influence and to compel the Sinhala regime to seek a negotiated political settlement with the Tamils. Central to this duplicitous strategy was a presumption that the militants would then be loyal and subservient to their military benefactors and could be manipulated according to India's overall geo-political and national interests. All the Tamil militant organisations were informed of the clandestine Indian programme to provide military training. Subsequently, these organisations were frantically increasing their numbers by recruiting new cadres in the North east of Sri Lanka. The absence of any authoritative LTTE leaders in Tamil Nadu deprived the LTTE of effective representation to articulate its views at both state and central government levels and left the door wide open for the other organisations to dominate the training programme. Added to the LTTE's problems was the absence of a political office through which the LTTE could be contacted. So, confronted with these difficulties, Bala and I, with the help of Baby Subramaniam and Nesan - who did much of the running work - and the funds collected in London for the LTTE, we set about reversing this inadequate situation. We all worked hard to establish contacts with known people in the Tamil diaspora to increase and secure financial backing. Bala immediately set about writing the lengthy document *The Liberation Tigers and the Tamil Freedom Struggle*. Every page he wrote was immediately typed out and each page sent to the printers for composing. (We could not find sophisticated printers in those days. Every word was composed by hand). The text would be proof read and corrected immediately. This went on day and night and within a matter of days the document was finished. It was immediately distributed and circulated to promote the LTTE's aims and objectives and political ideology. The third and most crucial thing we did was find new accommodation. From there, we established contact with journalists, politicians and intelligence agencies.

Shortly after we moved into a two bedroom flat in Santhome, the Tamil Nadu Special Branch Intelligence Bureau - who must have been tipped of about our whereabouts sent an officer, Mr Jumbo Kumar, to talk to Bala to find out what we were doing in Tamil Nadu. Regular meetings between the two developed into a friendship. Mr. Kumar subsequently introduced Bala to the high ranking intelligence officers of the Special Branch. DIG Alexander, who was in charge of Sri Lanka affairs of the state police, also became a close acquaintance of Bala's. Eventually, with the help of DIG Alexander, Bala was able to establish contacts with the RAW-Indian's equivalent of the American Central Intelligence Agency. Bala was able to convince the RAW officers that the LTTE, which unlike the other organisations was already engaged in armed struggle, should also have the military training programme made available to them.

Once Delhi had agreed to provide military training to the LTTE, it was necessary for Mr. Pirabakaran to return to India to practically implement the programme. Pirabakaran was maintaining a training camp in Vanni at that time. Bala sent a message informing him of RAW's willingness to offer military training to LTTE cadres and requesting him to come to India. Pirabakaran dispatched two of his lieutenants, Ragu and Mathaya, to meet Bala in Chennai and to find out details about India's offer. Mathaya and Ragu met Bala and myself in a hostel in Madurai. Bala explained to them in detail about the Indian training programme. Yet they were opposed to Pirabakaran returning to India where he was wanted at that time. They were highly sceptical and considered the offer of training as a ruse to

lure him back to India for his arrest. Bala wrote to Pirabakaran reassuring him that, in the political climate of the day, he couldn't imagine a scenario where the LTTE leader would be taken into custody. Ragu and Mathaya returned to Jaffna carrying the correspondence with them. Mr Pirabakaran trusted Bala's judgement and preparations were made to spirit him back into India and contact with RAW. All this, of course, was supposed to be top secret and much cloak and dagger activity went on. After Mr. Pirabakaran's arrival in India, a meeting was set up with top RAW officials in Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu's neighbouring state. So, in the middle of one night, Bala, myself and a couple of bodyguards piled into a car and drove the long distance to Pondicherry for the 'secret' meeting with the LTTE leaders and the big guns in RAW. At a specified time, the crucial meeting took place between Mr. Pirabakaran, Bala and the RAW officials. Bala and Thamby's smiling faces on their return to our rooms indicated that the meeting was a success. The LTTE was poised to embark on the Indian military training programme.

By late 1983, our Santhome home was well known and very overcrowded. Anything up to twenty people would be crammed into this small two bedroom flat. This overcrowding interfered with serious work and potentially posed a threat to Mr. Pirabakaran's personal security also. So once again, Bala and I decided to go house hunting in Chennai. We found a small house in Thiruvannamur, an outer suburb of Chennai. The house was to be a secret residence for Mr Pirabakaran, Bala and myself: neither secrecy nor privacy prevailed. It was not long before Mr Pirabakaran's most trusted and senior cadres started to visit the house and an endless stream of cadres were coming and going at all hours of the day. One of my favourite visitors was Ranjan. A short, very dark, young man, Ranjan would sit and show me the detonating process of explosives. His appearance belied his personality for he was a tough, courageous little fellow. Santhosam, meaning happiness was as you can imagine - always smiling. Both these young men died later on. Ranjan was killed when he was shot scaling a high fence trying to escape from a Sri Lankan army round up in Vadammarachchi. Santhosam was killed in battle with the Indian army in 1987. Although from Ariyalai, Jaffna, Santhosam was in charge of the LTTE cadres in Trincomalee for many years before his death.

Apart from our own residence, we rented another big house in Adyar and set up a political office. Here we were able to establish more contacts with the local and international media. Nesan was in charge of finance and typed hundreds of letters abroad appealing for funds. In the meantime, cadres from Sri Lanka, on their way to military training in Northern India, would call in to get instructions from Mr. Pirabakaran. It was quite interesting to meet these cadres for most of them were indeed hard core members. We became acquainted with several senior cadres who had been working closely with Mr. Pirabakaran. One man was in his late forties when he came for training. He had been a loyal underground LTTE member for years in Jaffna. He was known as Appiah Anna, an expert in land mines.

Early Days: Dimensions of Struggle

Over the long years I have been with the struggle I have learned a great deal about the intricacies of human behaviour and the subtleties of inter-personal relations. The struggle itself became an open university where I could learn about deeper aspects of human life. Certainly there is a romanticised view of a people's struggle or rather a national liberation struggle by outside observers watching an organisation and a people struggling for a noble cause. But to be an insider of the mainstream of liberation struggle is entirely a different matter; it involves a unique set of experiences and challenges.

A national liberation struggle is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. Firstly, there is the revolutionary organisation spearheading the struggle. Secondly, the social dimension of the liberation struggle and thirdly, the individual level of participation in the struggle. The national liberation organisation conducts its struggle on the politico- military level. In an armed revolutionary struggle for political freedom, the military and political aspects are inextricably inter-linked. The military struggle becomes the very instrument to achieve the political cause of liberation. Therefore, the liberation organisation and its leadership bear the enormous responsibility of charting the military and the political strategies towards the end cause of emancipation. The liberation struggle definitely involves a collectivity of people. To be more specific, a nation of people for whose political freedom the struggle is conducted. The struggle grows and develops in the form of resistance - armed resistance against state repression. This cycle of repression and resistance has its consequences on the socio-economic and cultural life of the people drawing them into the dynamics of the struggle as participants at different levels, depending on their choices. Then comes the individual level of participation. Here I am referring to the individual involved in the national liberation movement. The individual is compelled to wage his or her own struggle within the totality of the struggle in general, within the context of a multitude of contending situations, challenges, relationships. Or to put it more simply, the individual struggle runs parallel to the development and progress of the national liberation movement. And so as the years 1984 and 1985 unfolded I was exposed to events which were not only historical landmarks in the evolution of the struggle and the movement, but events which drew on my emotional and mental resources and ultimately strengthened me for the future years of the struggle and paved the way for a phenomenal resilience and tenacity in the event of many dimensions of adversity.

1984 was unprecedented for its rapid expansion and growth of the LTTE. There were two crucial factors that can account for this phenomenal transformation of a small guerrilla unit into an army of national liberation; both came together at a specific juncture. A crucial determinant in the creation of the LTTE as a liberation army was the training programme sponsored by India which built on the LTTE cadres' knowledge and expertise, thereby injecting a massive input into the military capability and potential of the LTTE. But the Indian military programme was limited. It provided training facilities for about two hundred cadres only. The programme alone could not have contributed to the massive expansion of the LTTE's military power, without financial support being available to Mr. Pirabakaran at that time to build and expand on the

opportunity provided by the Indian Government. That financial support came from the most powerful and resourceful person in Tamil Nadu - the Chief Minister Mr. M.G.Ramachandran. It was the early part of 1984. On the invitation of the Chief Minister, an LTTE team headed by Bala and consisting of Baby Subramaniam, Sankar and Mr. Nithiyandandan met him at his residence. The encounter was very fruitful. Bala convinced Mr. Ramachandran of the necessity and rationality behind the LTTE's armed struggle for the liberation of the Eelam Tamils. On the very first meeting, the Chief Minister offered financial assistance of millions of rupees. He was deeply moved by photos and video films shown to him that depicted the death and destruction caused by the Sinhala army in Tamil areas. The unreserved support and the unprecedented intervention of a revered figure in Tamil Nadu at that critical time was a lucky break for the LTTE. M.G.R's magnanimous gesture brought Mr. Pirabakaran into a close and intimate relationship with the legendary leader. With Mr. Ramachandran's personal funds flowing in millions into the LTTE's coffers, Mr. Pirabakaran was able to realise his visionary programme of expanding the LTTE into an authentic national liberation movement. The LTTE leader shrewdly utilised the funds in establishing several training camps in Tamil Nadu, recruiting a large number of new cadres and purchasing new weapon systems. Funds were also allocated to the political structure for more sustained political campaigns and propaganda work. It is no exaggeration to say that the financial assistance and the political support of Mr. M.G. Ramachandran were cardinal factors behind the growth and development of the LTTE at that crucial historical juncture. The LTTE drew in new and dynamic personalities and resources of enormous human potential. 1984 was important for the consolidation of a politico-ideological agenda.

In these early days of the growth of the movement, I was the only woman with access to the leadership and its internal dynamics. But that apart, I also had my own ideological positions and expectations for the movement and struggle. Central to the heyday of my ideology and politics was 'feminism'. I had read a substantial amount of feminist literature throughout my degree course and had taken 'women in society' as one of my options. In those heady days of trendy politics in a democratic society it was easy to wear the label 'feminist' or 'Marxist' or 'Marxist/feminist' or 'socialist/feminist' and god knows whatever labels we used to stick on ourselves. Most of my female English friends at university were feminists of one 'tendency' or another. Although I never joined any feminist group, I nevertheless sympathised with particular feminist campaigns, but more specifically with revolutionary struggles in third world countries as opposed to the reformist feminist politics that so characterised western feminism. But twenty years down the road, I would be reluctant to pin any label on myself, let alone the label 'feminist'. This does not mean that I have abandoned my concern about the oppression of women, far from it. What it means is that I have come to view gender relations from a perspective that stems from concrete socio-cultural observation and analysis as opposed to classical feminist dogma.

It was these informed feminist positions which excited hopes of a women's revolution in the Tamil national liberation struggle. I set out my views on the relationship between national liberation and women's emancipation in a small book 'Women and Revolution', published in Chennai in 1983. In this book, I argued that women, as part of the national masses, have

the right to realise their patriotism and to defend themselves against an onslaught on their people. Women's participation in the armed struggle strengthened the forces for national freedom and provided the space for them to also struggle for the emancipation of women in a liberated society. Mr. Pirabakaran informed me that many young women, with considerable risk to their lives, were already involved in different activities of the struggle by the assistance they provided to the LTTE cadres in Jaffna and he intended to work on a programme for the induction of women into the armed struggle. He also read to me letters from the Jaffna women activists requesting him to arrange military training for them and to provide space for their deeper participation in the people's defence against the brutal oppression going on around them and for the struggle for freedom. But for the time being, and rightly also as it turned out, his central concern in the latter part of 1983 was to capitalise on the golden opportunity of the military training programme offered to him by the Indian government. Subsequently, hundreds of young men from the Northeast seeking military training were recruited into the LTTE under the command of Mr. Pirabakaran's senior cadres and despatched to Northern India for the duration of the programme. Having secured military training for a substantial number of his cadres in Indian military bases, Mr. Pirabakaran turned his attention to the establishment of military camps in Tamil Nadu. From there he intended to strengthen his military forces by delegating the responsibility for the proficient military training of new recruits to selected Indian trained cadres. It was in the midst of such hectic activity and planning at the end of 1983, I was informed by Mr. Pirabakaran that I would have some company soon as four girls would be coming to Chennai from Jaffna. But although these four young women were sympathetic to the struggle, none were coming to India specifically for military training by the LTTE. Mr. Pirabakaran's lieutenants had rescued these young women from death when they were engaged in a hunger strike at the Jaffna University in protest against the lack of education facilities for Tamil students. Mr. Pirabakaran was concerned for the well being of these four women students, now without family and friends, and decided they were to be accommodated with us in our 'secret' residence in Thiruvannamur when they came from Jaffna. Under the direct responsibility of Mr. Pirabakaran and with Bala and I, being a married couple, living with us was seen as the best socio-cultural situation for the young women. But although their coming to Chennai and immediately into contact with the leader of the LTTE was not based on any conceptions of 'feminism' or women's involvement in struggle, these girls - Mathy, Vinoja, Jeya and Lalitha - created an unintended minor revolution in the organisation.

Even at this historical stage of the struggle, the LTTE upheld a rigid code of moral conduct among the cadres. Premarital separation between the sexes is a well-entrenched cultural norm among the conservative sections of the Hindu Jaffna society and Mr. Pirabakaran was sensitive to the importance of this sensibility amongst the Tamil people. He demonstrated considerable political acumen by identifying this socio-cultural factor as crucial if he was to continue to enjoy the widespread support of the people that the LTTE did at this stage and sustain the recruitment level into the organisation. But while the accommodation of these four unknown girls appears to break the code of conduct and accommodating them in Mr. Pirabakaran's residence might seem at odds with his security concerns, it is not surprising in the context of his felt responsibility and inherent duty as a Tamil man and 'anna' (older brother) and

the leader of an organisation to ensure the well being of these four young unmarried women. But as time progressed and as Mr. Pirabakaran came to know these young women more closely it became clear that he had developed a special liking for one of the students. Mathy (Mathivathani) had won his heart. We were not surprised when we learned of this relationship because Mathy was not only a beautiful young woman, but she was exceptionally gentle and caring, living a pious life according to the moral dictates of the Hindu religion. Mathy, who caused the revolution in Mr. Pirabakaran and, by implication, the movement, was a student of agricultural science when she was whisked away from the site of the student demonstration in Jaffna into history.

Although Bala and I were in agreement with the LTTE leaders and cadres that a national liberation movement should maintain high stands of organisational and personal discipline and codes of moral conduct appropriate to cadres who represent and advance the aspirations and interests of their people, we were never comfortable with the lack of flexibility of the rules. The stipulated codes of moral conduct, we held, were not based on either a realistic or mature understanding of human emotions and relations or the probability of upholding the rules over the long term. Nature itself, despite personal effort to maintain discipline, in our view, would propel relationships between the sexes. Bala and I were also well aware that when these powerful and compelling forces of love struck Mr. Pirabakaran he would be overwhelmed with their intensity and tenacity. And so it came to be. Love for a woman filled his heart and he was absolutely besotted with Mathy and she with him. It was vital too, as far as we were concerned, that this relationship, in the long-term interests of the organisation and the cadres, should end in marriage. If Mr. Pirabakaran had retained his chaste status he would have had to live up to the image of a saint and all the cadres then and now, would have been condemned to emotional sterility and frustration. In political terms Mr. Pirabakaran's relationship with Mathy was a crucial, healthy and progressive element in perceiving him as a leader. The Tamil community, which views unmarried people as not fully matured adults, would be more confident in the judgement of a leader who has been mellowed and matured by the profound emotional experience and responsibility of marriage and family life. But, since Mr. Pirabakaran's relationship with Mathy was in contravention of the organisation's code of conduct, he was aware that he would meet with severe criticism, even resentment amongst his cadres. Mr. Pirabakaran turned to Bala for help in not only defending this relationship to the leaders and cadres in the organisation, but by providing courtship opportunities for the couple.

As we expected, Mr. Pirabakaran's relationship with Mathy did cause a storm and was met with a great deal of opposition from his senior colleagues and amongst the cadreship. Mathy's family, on being informed of this serious development in their daughter's life, rushed to Chennai from Jaffna to learn about the depth of the relationship and where it would lead their daughter in the future. But on learning of their daughter's sentiments and commitment, and after long discussions between Bala and Mathy's father, parental consent to the relationship was given. Mathy's parents handed over the responsibility of the well-being of their daughter's relationship with Mr. Pirabakaran to our care and returned happily to Jaffna. What remained

was a clarification and explanation of the affair to Mr. Pirabakaran's senior colleagues and the cadres in the organisation.

Mr. Pirabakaran's senior and closest cadres were called to Chennai from Jaffna and informed of his romantic relationship with Mathy and the probable marriage in the near future. Some of the senior cadres who had renounced their love relationships to abide by the code of conduct of the organisation were not pleased with their leader's romantic love. Bala explained that the old moral code of the organisation was rigid and puritanical and had to be changed to keep abreast with the times. He also argued that romance and heroism were values upheld in Tamil culture. Mr. Pirabakaran's love relationship had the potential to revolutionise the organisation by making available to the cadres the possibility of a fulfilling love relationship, marriage and family life for them also in the future. This turn of events should be viewed as a positive development in the growth and image of the organisation, Bala argued. The senior colleagues reluctantly accepted the inevitability of an end to their leaders celibate days. Mr. Pirabakaran's romance and marriage did effect profound change in the organisation as one by one many cadres fell in love and wanted to marry. Marriage and family life have now become the norm in the organisation.

As the movement expanded, our house in Thiruvananthapuram became overcrowded and inadequate for the work that had to be done. We decided to rent a bigger house that would act as a base for more women coming into the movement. The house we then rented had plenty of room and was suitable for the accommodation of several women cadres. In this new house Bala and I occupied an upstairs room, which extended out onto a balcony. As more young women joined the LTTE and came to live with us, this room became a place of solitude for Bala and myself and we spent many hours reading and in private discussion on the balcony in the cool of the evening.

Following the anti-Tamil riots of July 1983, several young, enthusiastic women from the North of Sri Lanka had been recruited by Sri Sabarantam's TELO organisation and brought across the Palk Strait to Tamil Nadu for military training. Soon after their arrival in Tamil Nadu the young women discovered that the TELO had not established a women's organisational structure into which they could find a place and nobody had been appointed as responsible for their maintenance and care. A great deal of disillusionment had set in amongst them. Approaches were made by some Catholic priests on behalf of the TELO girls to join the LTTE. When news of this situation came to Mr. Pirabakaran's ears he agreed that they could join the organisation and assured them that they would be included in a military training program when sufficient numbers of women had been recruited to start the first training camp. So shortly after taking up our new residence these disaffected TELO girls joined the four women students in living with us. Amongst these girls was Sothia, who, several years later, became the very popular and capable first woman leader of the LTTE's women's military wing. The self sufficient Sugi, who became an excellent markswoman and fired the first RPG into a vital sentry point presaging the first suicide attack on the Nelliady army camp in 1985, was also amongst this group. Theepa from Mullaitivu was also part of the TELO group and she went on to become an instructor at the first training camp in Jaffna managed by women cadres.

Imelda gave her life for the struggle in Jaffna and Vasanthi, an extremely talented and athletic young woman became a quadriplegic following an accidental shooting by her brother. Two of the women students from Jaffna also went on to an illustrious history in the LTTE. Jeya, a political science student before she joined the organisation, became famous for her underground activities in Jaffna during the period of Indian army occupation and later assumed the post of head of the political section of the LTTE's women's wing in 1993. She later married and subsequently left the organisation. Lalitha, a veteran of several military campaigns after 1990, is now retired from the battlefield and has become deeply involved with a longstanding passion in her life: her love of children. She is now in charge of SenCholai a residential school for orphaned girls and children. Shanti defected from a small militant group in Batticaloa to join the LTTE and she ultimately was placed in charge of the women's intelligence wing. She left the organisation many years later.

A group of young women living under one roof proved to be a real experience, particularly when they were so close to a leadership they revered. Mr. Pirabakaran's official visits to Bala and his romantic visits to Mathy sent the young women scurrying to prepare snacks he liked. But although we lived quietly working to maintain our environment and not wishing to draw unnecessary attention to ourselves, the location of our house compelled us to take into account the social context we were living in. Our residence was located amidst an extended family of conservative Brahmins, so it was necessary to be sensitive to the perceptions the local people might form of us. The presence of a white woman in the neighbourhood was, inevitably, a curiosity in itself. A house full of young women dressed in skirts and blouses as opposed to the typical modest half sari so typical of young Indian women and traditional Brahmin girls, was an added perplexity to excite interest from our inquisitive neighbours. The frequent visits by Mr. Pirabakaran and his vehicle load of bodyguards at all hours of the day did not encourage a positive image and climate about our presence in the neighbourhood. Subsequently, Bala was compelled to politely suggest to Mr. Pirabakaran that it would be in everybody's interest if he constrained his visits to the daylight hours only. Added to our concerns about the perceptions of us in the area was the unpleasant experience we were subjected to in our first Thiruvannamur house. The uniformed local opinion had a total misconception concerning our residency in Thiruvannamur, particularly concerning my role.

On my first visit to Chennai in 1979 to meet Mr. Pirabakaran, I had been subjected to the first experience of being misunderstood by the local people. People passing our lodge held a fixed gaze as they passed by with heads turned towards our room. But this second episode of misgivings concerning my presence in Thiruvannamur in 1984 was far more grave. The local community, through a combination of suspicion and deduction, had come to the conclusion I was functioning as the madam of a brothel. Retrospectively, if one observes our house through the eyes of the local people, it is difficult not to see how there could have been any other conclusion for them. From their perspective a white woman was living amongst Tamil men in a rented house, with four beautiful young Tamil women, and different men were visiting the place frequently, even late at night. But rather than inquiring directly from us and clarifying their suspicions and concerns about our presence, mischievous minds in the community worked up a juicy story and incited the local people with all sorts of notions of debauchery going on in

their neighbourhood. In a society which holds the virginity and chastity of women, monogamy and premarital sexual abstinence as some of its cardinal and guiding moral principles, the possibility of these values being openly flouted by a white woman managing a brothel in their own neighborhood, outraged the local community. So, worked up into a moral frenzy, some of the local people banded together and marched on our house to protest our presence. At that time neither Bala, nor Mr. Pirabakaran, or any of the male cadres were present in the house. The young women were inside frozen with fear at this spectacle of the angry mob in front of our house. I could not understand the abusive language hurled at me, yet I could see the anger and fury on their faces. The crowd was becoming restless and violent and someone pelted stones on the house. To our great relief, Mr. Ponnaman, a senior leader and trusted lieutenant of Mr. Pirabakaran, came to the house with some cadres in a jeep. They were outraged and furious when they found out the abhorrent misunderstanding of the crowd and the aspersions cast on our characters. Ponnaman shouted at the crowd and told him who we were, displaying his pistol as proof. The violent mob became silent and apologetic and started to disperse when they were told that we were Tamil Tigers, the freedom fighters from Tamil Eelam on a military training project in India.

This experience left a bitter taste in my mouth and I had no intention or wish to provide neither the scope for a repetition of such misconstrued perceptions to be floated nor a repetition of an ugly, hostile incident. Indeed, this incident effected a profound shift in my understanding of women in society; it was a comprehensive and penetrating socio-cultural lesson for me on the emphasis the Tamil people place on moral values. Public opinion as a mode of social control of women was an issue that surfaced again and again in various degrees and forms throughout my life in India and Sri Lanka. And, I might add, as a way of exciting the curiosity or anger of feminists who read this, is an issue hugely perpetrated by women themselves. But here I am only touching on the matter; in actuality it is a far more complex and complicated social issue linked to the whole phenomena of women in society and would, in itself, require a book if justice was done to the subject. Suffice to say that aspersions cast on the moral character of women is a death knell to her maintaining or establishing any kind of credible friendships and respect amongst people in the community. Once a woman is labeled as a 'bad' character in the Tamil society she loses her moral authority. For any of the young women with us to have been mistakenly accused of prostitution would have had far reaching negative consequences for the future of women in the LTTE too. Such an inaccurate and nasty piece of gossip would have spread like wildfire and even rational explanation would not be sufficient to completely erase that perception. Doubts would have lingered. A woman in Tamil society does not have to be an actual prostitute to be labeled a 'bad' character. The concept 'bad' character is loosely used and is broad in its application. The social perimeters around which a woman can operate before she is considered a 'bad' character are indeed narrow by western standards. For example, an unmarried girl seen frequently talking to boys runs the risk of being considered a 'bad' character. A girl who has a boyfriend and does not marry him can be more or less assured of the label a 'bad' character. But the incident in Thiruvananthapuram made me extremely sensitive as to how others perceive our behaviour and I became conscious of the power and potential devastation of public opinion on a woman's life. It was invaluable for what it taught me in the

context of understanding the problems involved in mobilising women for a political struggle. Regardless of how ‘revolutionary’ we might consider ourselves to be, or how prepared we are to face the consequences of flouting social and cultural norms, it is important to understand and respect the values and norms of a society. We must find ways and means to work through the cultural system if we are to effect social change. There is absolutely nothing to be gained by violating the norms of society if such action renders one politically ineffective.

Difficult Times

During our radical days in London we were constantly involved in propaganda work against the Sri Lanka state. We protested against the atrocities committed by the Sri Lankan army and waged campaigns against identified Sinhala chauvinist politicians. When we received information that two priests, two doctors and two lecturers from Jaffna University had been arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and incarcerated in Sri Lanka’s notorious Welikade prison, we worked hard in London campaigning to bring their case to the attention and concern of the international community. One detained Tamil woman was Nirmala Nithyananthan, a lecturer and reputed Tamil writer.

Nirmala Nithyanandan was projected as a literary figure and feminist, illegally imprisoned for her political views and violation of her human rights and in danger of being subjected to inhumane treatment. An international campaign for her freedom was launched. Nirmala’s continued imprisonment was a source of grave concern, particularly during the anti-Tamil riots of 1983 when Sinhala inmates and prison guards massacred Tamil political prisoners. Housed in the women’s wing of the prison, she was lucky to escape the torment of women prisoners and was eventually transferred to Batticaloa jail, along with the surviving Tamil detainees. The LTTE cadres in the Batticaloa district planned a raid to free the remaining Tamil political prisoners. When I heard she had been freed from the Batticaloa prison in the middle of 1984 by one of our cadres during a daring escape operation, I was thrilled and her boldness added to my respect for her. I received the news from Mr. Pirabakaran that she would be coming to Chennai to work with the organisation, with great expectancy. I looked forward to working with an English-speaking colleague with whom I could discuss many issues.

Mr. Pirabakaran was less than enthusiastic about the prospect of Nirmala joining the LTTE and a contradiction in feminist perceptions was clearly evident. For him, Nirmala’s conception and projection of women’s liberation did not tally with his view or vision of Tamil women’s liberation. In Mr. Pirabakaran’s ideological perspective, Nirmala’s idea of women’s liberation represented more the stereo-typed conception of western women’s liberation than an emancipation which the masses of Tamil women could identify with and embrace as their own. Delegating the task of building the women’s wing of the LTTE to Nirmala was not in Mr. Pirabakaran’s scheme of things. Mr. Pirabakaran proved to be correct in his view of Nirmala as unsuitable for any role in the women’s wing. Not only he, but also the girls who were with us, had difficulty in relating to and comprehending Nirmala’s ‘radicalism’. She was a

world apart from the village girls who had come to join the struggle and fight for their homeland and had no real idea of women's liberation, nor necessarily aspired for it. Indeed, Mr. Pirabakaran was far more effective in tapping into the sentiments and thinking of the young Tamil women and winning their support and he persisted with his commitment to building a women's section and has subsequently assumed the role of leader and mentor of the wing. Not even Nimala's gallant history of opposition to the state forces could dislodge her alienation or inspire any confidence in women's emancipation. Nimala revealed herself as a vehement critic of the organisation but was totally incapable of offering any realistic, viable alternative which would mobilise the people to confront the mounting scale of oppression they were being subjected to. The young women's dislike of Nirmala, and many other issues that became controversial, ultimately resulted in her divorce from the organisation. But while Nirmala's relationship with the LTTE was essentially unproductive, the role played by her husband Mr. Nithyanandan (affectionately called Nithy) was creative and productive. As the editor of the organisation's official newspaper *Viduthalai Puligal* (Liberation Tigers) he wrote several articles representing the LTTE's position and introducing other national liberation struggles to our cadres and readers. While the paper has survived since 1984 as the official organ of the LTTE, Mr. Nithyanandan has not. He departed from the organisation along with his wife at the end of 1984.

But my political concern about women being mobilised for participation in the movement was just one dimension of the struggle within me. My accommodative personality meant that I didn't have any real problems relating to most people I met and I enjoyed the warmth of the cadres who sympathised with me as a western woman in a new world. There was never any question concerning my commitment for they well realised, as fugitives themselves of the Sri Lanka state, the level of sacrifice entailed by involving in a people's armed struggle for national freedom. Nevertheless, although I had previously visited India and had developed a 'feel' of the socio-cultural setting and lifestyle, my knowledge of the nuances of the society and culture proved to be extremely limited. If Bala had not been there to guide me through the complicated cultural network I'm sure I would have been misunderstood, unable to deal with people, even perhaps unintentionally offended people. To put it succinctly, the process of acculturation was, initially, a massive cultural shock. It amounted to nothing less than my learning an entirely new socio-cultural world. I came to learn and understand a new perspective on morality and values. I adjusted some of my behaviour. I developed a different, more complex way of thinking. Many of my ideas were re-worked; my lifestyle totally changed and my perception of dress also changed. Consequently, I have learned over the years it is quite one thing to visit a country for a brief period of time or to live within your own community in a foreign country; it really is quite different matter to become part of another community.

On this level my experience in India and Sri Lanka was quite exceptional. Ultimately, I saw the world through Tamil eyes, felt the way the Tamil community does and even thought the same way on many issues. I shared and identified with the people's thoughts and sentiments on the character of the oppression they were subjected to on a daily basis. As a result, I felt that the responses of the people were authentic and logical. On a different note, I had to learn simple things such as how to shop and bargain. Although it was a rare occasion that I was

ever cheated when I went shopping, I found it necessary to demonstrate that I was aware of various selling techniques if I was to avoid becoming a soft target for exploitation.

A Change of Lifestyle

Mathy and Pirabakaran were married in a simple temple ceremony at Murugan temple, Thiruporur on the 1st October 1984. A son was born to them and named after a close confidante of Mr. Pirabakaran, Charles Anthony Seelan, one of the earliest LTTE cadres to die in confrontation with the Sri Lankan army. A daughter, Thuwaraha was born soon after and given the name of one of Mathy's bodyguards who had died in military operations in Jaffna. Their third child was born ten years later and bears the name of Mathy's young brother, an LTTE cadre killed by the Indian army Balachandran. The naming of their children after fallen heroes of the struggle is a custom adopted by LTTE cadres to perpetuate the memory and history of relatives, friends or close colleagues. In choosing Mathy as his wife, Mr Pirabakaran was more than blessed, for over the years of their marriage she has provided him with unwavering love and surrounded him with the security and warmth of family life; often under very difficult conditions and situations. It has not been a bed of roses for Mathy. A very gentle and tender character, she has had to rise to the occasion in many instances and overcome several emotionally stressful circumstances. Mr Pirabakaran's work has necessitated long separations between the couple. Subsequently in the early days of their marriage, Mathy was subjected to episodes of painful loneliness. But she underwent severe emotional hardship during the occupation of the Northeast by the Indian army. With the outbreak of the IndoLTTE war, Mathy found herself and her children as refugees in the Nallur Kandasamy temple. Mathy then left her two children in the care of her parents and joined Mr. Pirabakaran in the Alampil jungles of Manal Aru in the Mullaitivu district. The relentless artillery shelling of their Alampil camp, the separation of a young mother from her toddler children and the tragic death of her much loved younger brother in combat against the Indian army, took its toll on Mathy. She was later reunited with her children and went abroad where she resided in Sweden. But living a secret life in Sweden with two small children, unfamiliar with the culture, separated from a husband in constant danger and without the support of close relatives, Mathy was once again subjected to severe emotional strain and stress. When the LTTE entered into negotiations with the Premadasa Government in Sri Lanka in 1989, Bala arranged for Mathy's return to Sri Lanka. On one of our return trips to Sri Lanka, Mathy and her children joined us in transit at the Singapore airport and flew to Colombo. Premadasa's government arranged for a helicopter to transport her family along with us to the Alampil jungle and she was reunited with Mr. Pirabakaran again in 1989. Throughout the years of her marriage Mathy has never known a permanent home and safe family life. Nevertheless, she has lived out the role of wife to a guerrilla leader with great courage and dignity and consistently struggled to provide a stable life for her children. Soon after Mathy's departure from our house to marry, the remaining young women were sent to Madurai, Tamil Nadu in October 1984 for the first military training programme for LTTE women cadres.

When the young women's camp shifted to Madurai, our house was too big and empty and of no use to us and we decided to find a residence suitable for the two of us only. Our friend Nesan found a wonderful two bedroom flat on the seaside in Besant Nagar a suburb of Chennai. Here Bala was able to re-establish his relationship with one of the loves of his life - nature, and I too was able to unravel the complexities of the past year in a more uncomplicated environment. Joining us here would be a new comer to our family and, apart from a two years interval, inseparable from us until the last months of her fifteen years of life - our dog Jimmy. On a visit to one of the organisation's offices, Bala noticed a little white pup frantically pulling on the chain it was tied with. Unable to tolerate the little pup's captivity and its woeful, pleading antics, Bala bent down, untied it and took it home with him. So, one day, quite unexpectedly, Bala walked into the house with a white fluffy ball under his arm. He walked up to me and pushed this ball of fluff into my hands. 'Here', he said, "This is for you. A friend to keep you company'. Well he was right about that; Jimmy did turn out to be a real friend: loyal and forgiving of any mistakes or unintended cruelties, infinitely patient and uncompromisingly trusting. And thus began a journey into and an appreciation of the world of animals which led, ultimately, to my becoming a vegetarian. But the innocence of this little dog was so refreshing after the politics of the year and her needs too, compelled us to spend more time enjoying nature on the beach in front of our house.

One of the most pleasurable aspects of the lifestyle in India -and Sri Lanka for that matter- is the habit of rising early in the morning. Daybreak in India is not subject to variations in time throughout the seasons. The sun rises between 5.30a.m and 6a.m every morning so there is no difficulty in waking up. Indeed it is quite common for people to get up as early as 3.30 in the morning; but 4 o'clock would be considered a reasonable time. Women get up early and sweep the compound of the house, prepare breakfast for the family and so on. Some people prefer to rise early and do as much work as is possible before the fury of the day sun. Getting up early is also considered the best time of the day for mental alertness too and students generally spend many hours studying in the early morning freshness. Other people just enjoy early morning exercise and large numbers of regular walkers was a common sight along the beach road in front of our flat. But the early seaside mornings, with the sun creeping up over the horizon sending out its shimmering rays of lighting over the sky and the gentle lapping of the waves on the white sands, would beckon us to join in its peace and splendor and so we would stroll down to meet the ocean waters and then set Jimmy free for some time. Just a pup, her body could barely contain her joy and she exploded in happiness on the beach. If, for some reason or other, we couldn't make it to greet the morning sun we would, in all likelihood, be there in the evening to send it off. An appropriately located eating place just off the beach with its delicious dishes of Tamil food at very cheap prices, always tempted our friends to join us in the evenings too. Adding to this generally very pleasant and cordial environment, Carnatic music - classical Tamil music - could be heard blaring from the loud speakers of a nearby temple. So, the uncomplicated innocence and beauty of the natural world compensated for the turbulence of my inner world caused by the intrigues of politics.

New Administration in Delhi

And beyond all this, the history of the struggle continued, inexorably making its own twists and turns shaped by extraordinary events. The political scene in Delhi changed dramatically with the tragic assassination of Indira Gandhi in October 1984. Indira's son, Rajiv Gandhi, perpetuated the Nehru dynasty when he replaced his mother as the Prime Minister of India. The sudden and unexpected demise of the politically mature and sophisticated Mrs. Gandhi was a severe blow to the Tamil freedom movement. Mrs. Gandhi had a profound understanding of the history and complexity of the Tamil struggle for self-determination. She resented Jayawardene's oppressive policies and sympathised with the predicament of the oppressed. She supported the Tamil armed resistance campaign against the Sinhala state. It was because of her sympathy for the Tamil cause that Mrs. Gandhi made the bold decision to militarily train and arm the Tamil militant movement to create a powerful force of resistance to compel Jayawardene's regime to adopt a rational political path renouncing the military option. The new Indian Prime Minister was a novice insofar as the intricate and complex manners in which foreign policy determinations were chartered by the wise old lady. The young, inexperienced Rajiv could not immediately comprehend the geo-political and strategic motivations behind India's covert involvement in actively assisting Tamil armed resistance in Sri Lanka. His poverty of knowledge with regard to the history of the Tamil political struggle and his lack of understanding of the enormous suffering faced by the oppressed Tamil people led him to adopt a more rigid interventionist policy. Subsequently, Rajiv's administration felt that the time had come to suspend military assistance to the militants and to persuade them to effect a cease-fire and seek a negotiated political settlement to the ethnic conflict.

In pursuit of this policy determination by the new Indian administration of Rajiv Gandhi, the Tamil militant organisations were advised by the Indian intelligence officials to relinquish their demand for an independent Tamil state and prepare themselves for a negotiated political settlement within the unitary structure of the Sri Lankan state. The militant organisations, which campaigned, recruited and fought for the cause of political independence and statehood, were deeply disillusioned. Apart from the LTTE leadership who, from the outset, had a clear vision of India's strategic designs the other organisations, until then, were confident that India would help to carve out an independent state for the Tamils as it created Bangladesh for the East Bengalis. From the outset, the LTTE knew that India's assistance to Tamil resistance was to bring military pressure on President Jayawardene and to strengthen the bargaining power of the Tamils, but certainly not to create an independent Tamil state in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, there was deep disenchantment amongst the LTTE leaders when the Indian administration started to pressurise the militant organisations towards a reconciliatory approach to the Sinhala state. India's aggressive persuasion for a peace process caused consternation among militant organisations who knew that the cunning 'old fox', J.R. Jayawardene would not be fair and just to the Tamils. Bala felt a major contradiction between the Tamil cause and India's strategic interest in the island was beginning to emerge; how to reconcile such a contradiction was the major problem that pre-occupied his mind at that time.

In the meantime, the LTTE embarked on a massive programme of expanding the politico-military structure of the organisation. Mr. Pirabakaran had already established several military training camps in the remote jungles of Tamil Nadu and there had been a steady flow of young cadres from Tamil Eelam for military training. With the huge input of funds from MGR, the LTTE was purchasing arms from abroad. Indeed on one occasion the rooms in our house were full of AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades. Similarly, millions of rupees were also stored in the wardrobe of our room: a veritable treasure for any thief. The political office had expanded and had become well established. Media people from all over the world were frequent visitors. The organisation was publishing its official organ in Tamil. I was helping Bala in the production and publishing of the LTTE's publication in English, the 'Voice of Tigers'. It was this publication which took me to the refugee camps in Tamil Nadu.

Refugees in Tamil Nadu

Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka have always considered Tamil Nadu a safe haven. The language, culture, religion, etc have made it a 'home away from home' for thousands and thousands of refugees who fled in fear for their own and their family's lives. Many Sri Lankan Tamil refugees had set up small businesses, bought homes and are well settled in Tamil Nadu. But many have not been so lucky. In the early part of 1985, an estimated twenty thousand Tamil people from the coastal area of Mannar island took to the seas in what was referred to as the Tamil equivalent of the Vietnamese 'boat people' fleeing from the persecution of the Sri Lankan army in the area. This sudden mass influx of destitute and distressed Tamil refugees landing on their Eastern coastal shores found the Tamil Nadu state authorities totally ill equipped and unprepared for such a huge humanitarian tragedy. The silo-like structure of cyclone shelters built for the protection of the local population in the times of climatic emergencies dotted the coastal area belt and became home to thousands of Tamil refugees from Mannar. I decided to travel to Kovalam in Tamil Nadu to hear their stories and take a look at their conditions and write an article for the 'Voice of Tigers'.

The cyclone shelters are roomless circular structures, dotted along the Eastern coastal belt of Tamil Nadu. They are located here as a source of shelter for the surrounding villagers should cyclonic winds lash the coastal area, sweeping across Tamil Nadu as they did soon after the death of Indira Gandhi in 1984. After living through this frightening episode of nature's fury, which uprooted everything that stood in its way and flooded the area with filthy waist deep water, as it swirled and whirled its way across Chennai, I could well appreciate the necessity of shelters being solid. But while they were appropriate for temporary, emergency accommodation against cyclonic winds and rain they were absolutely inadequate for permanent refugee accommodation. My heart sank when I walked into the building. Swarms of flies were everywhere. The roomless shelter had become a maze of ragged and colorful saris. It is one of the ironies of human life that, despite the commonality of situations of collective living, the people always revert to their basic social cell - the family. So in a desperate attempt for privacy, each family had cordoned off a small area -sometimes as small area of a few square

feet - by tying their least needed saris together and hanging them as de facto walls, separating themselves from their neighbour. Behind these veiled walls, families of five, six, seven, eight, perhaps even more, the very old, the newly married and the newborn would stake their claim to survive. Smoke and fumes from kerosene cookers or makeshift wood stoves made the place eerie as well as unhealthy and dangerous. But when I started to talk to the people and looked around, I could see immediately that the population did not have enough to eat. Small pot bellied babies with skinny arms and legs and faded black hair were a common sight; naturally enough since milk or milk powder was in very short supply and mothers were feeding their babies on black tea with a little sugar or the water from the boiled rice. Coughs and colds, runny noses, fever, scabies and diarrhoea without any medicines for their treatment, were major health problems.

I felt both guilty and helpless when I saw this human tragedy: guilty because I was not one of them and helpless because I had nothing to offer. But most of all I was humbled, and I was to experience this repeatedly during my many years in India and Sri Lanka. Within the midst of this poverty and hardship it is quite amazing how people retain their humanity and struggle to maintain their dignity and civility. On this occasion, when scarcity was evident, with typical Tamil hospitality and generosity, people came forward to share with us whatever they had and offered us sweet tea, surely somebody's rations for the day.

It was really quite easy for me to write about this human tragedy in an article for the paper, but it was not so easy to rid myself of the disturbing images of the general sub-human conditions the people were living in. In fact I was quite concerned about the prognosis of many of the young babies. Since the refugees were part of the nation we were struggling for, I could not just walk away from this situation. A liberation movement, which purports to represent its people, is duty bound to look into their welfare, apart from conducting the struggle in the politico-military sphere. Because I knew that although he was managing the organisation on a tight budget Mr. Pirabakaran could afford to spare me a pittance of 5000 rupees, I confronted him with the problem when he came to visit us and asked him for the funds to at least buy a few rations and medicine for this one camp. He readily agreed. Dr Jeykularajah, who had also escaped from the Batticaloa prison, more than happily agreed to accompany me to carry out medical check ups in the refugee camps and attend to the sick children. Through fund raising and donations the work expanded and our group attended many refugee camps all over Tamil Nadu. Finally we decided to regularise our work and Bala wrote a constitution and our work became registered as a charity under the name of the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation with the objective of providing assistance to the thousands of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India. Dr. Jeykularajah became an active worker for this organisation and as time progressed the responsibility for managing and planning the programmes and projects was eventually handed over to others. Over the years, the TRO has become an effective, independent charity organisation providing various forms of assistance to the thousands and thousands of displaced Tamil people in their homeland in the Northeast of Sri Lanka.

India is a land of paradoxes. The most puzzling contradiction that amazes any stranger about the Indian social life is the irreconcilable chasm between the rich and the poor. There are

exceptionally rich people in India as well as the extremely poor -the real wretched of the earth. Between these antithetical extremes there is the dominant Indian middle classes. My intention is not to offer a class analysis of the extreme poverty. I only wish to drive a point that in India one finds this extraordinary phenomenon of excessive wealth and extreme pauperism. It is true that I was deeply distressed over the cramped and inhuman conditions in which the Tamil refugees were living in India. Yet the conditions of poverty in Tamil Nadu were a disturbing factor also. I am still haunted by an image that profoundly affected me.

Our flat on the beach in Besant Nagar proved to be a great observation point for watching the world go by and there always seemed to be something going on to remind me of social injustice and poverty. I was standing, looking out the flat window in a lazy and pensive mood one afternoon. From a distance down the street in front of me I could see a gaunt figure zigzagging along the walking area. As the figure came nearer I deciphered a young man around the age of thirty. His hair was long and unkempt; his ribs showed through his skin. In fact he reminded me very much of the thin, longhaired statue of Jesus Christ we often see nailed to the cross in photos and churches. At a certain point I realised this young man was halting at the huge pipe-shaped rubbish bins placed at several points along the road. When I was able to see him more clearly I noticed he was scavenging the rubbish bins for food scraps. While seeing human beings scavenging for food was not uncommon in India, the scene to follow was. Eventually this young man moved towards the rubbish dump in front of our flat. Simultaneously a cow wandered from a different direction and the two met over the same dump and proceeded to share and feast on the pile of putrefying rubbish. While the young man gnawed on left over food scraps he had dug out of the rubbish, the cow muzzled the bin from the other side and chewed away at its pickings. This scene remains etched in my mind as a depiction of utter poverty, deprivation and the degradation of a human being.

Unity and Separation

1985 had its own twists and turns. The Tamil militant organisations were exposed to new political and diplomatic challenges in their relations between themselves and in dealing with the Indian and Sri Lankan governments. After assuming power as the Prime Minister of India, the young Rajiv Gandhi inducted into the ruling structure his own confidantes, removing some talented and experienced persons who were loyal to his mother and had worked with her for many years. In this respect, the new Prime Minister made a serious blunder when he replaced his advisor, the sagacious G. Parthasarathy with the inexperienced and brash Romesh Bhandari as Foreign Secretary. Parthasarathy was an experienced and skilled diplomat with a profound understanding of the Sri Lankan ethnic crisis. He despised the racist politics of the Jayawardene regime and sympathised with the Tamil cause. Mr. Parthasarathy made it a point to meet Mr. Pirabakaran and Bala at his private residence whenever they visited Delhi. Bala conveyed to me that Mr. Parthasarathy did not trust Jayawardene and had cautioned Rajiv about the deviousness of the 'old fox'. Unfortunately Rajiv ignored and undervalued Mr. Parthasarathy's studied advice and finally ditched him. The disappearance

of these two powerful personalities - Indira Gandhi and Parthasarathy - from the corridors of power in Delhi, enabled Jayawardene to practice his art of political deception with the impetuous, inexperienced Rajiv. The Machiavellian Jayawardene shrewdly manipulated Bhandari to entice Rajiv into his devious scheme of turning the Indian state against the Tamil resistance movement.

Watching with curiosity and scepticism the formation of an unholy alliance between Rajiv Gandhi and Jayawardene were the Tamil liberation organisations encamped in Tamil Nadu, India. Their future hung in the balance. Bala followed the events with keen interest and could foresee an emerging scenario where India would begin to flex its muscle to compel the armed liberation organisations to give up the struggle for self-determination and opt for a political settlement within the unitary structure of the Sri Lankan state. How to avoid a confrontation with the Indian government while pursuing the LTTE's political project of self-determination and political independence was the issue that obsessed Bala during this period. We knew that India was the regional superpower and had a vital role to play in determining the resolution of the ethnic conflict and that any strain in the relationship could spell disaster. Though Bala, along with Mr. Pirabakaran, met senior Government leaders, party chiefs, Ministers, top officials of the intelligence agencies and argued their case for self-determination of the Tamils they were met with negative responses. India had serious internal compulsions of its own to resist secessionist struggles in her neighbourhood, though sympathy was shown, in some circles, over the plight of the Tamils pitted against the genocidal oppression of the Sinhala state. The impending pressure from India and the possible conflict of interest that might arise between the Indian Government and the Tamil freedom movement made Bala realise the significance of a united front of Tamil organisations to articulate a collective view. He felt that the LTTE alone could not confront the politico-diplomatic challenge that India might soon exert. An alliance between TELO, EPRLF and EROS under the umbrella organisation called the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF) had already been formed in April 1984. Bala felt that the LTTE should join the ENLF to strengthen the Tamil armed resistance movement and to inject enormous clout into the Tamil struggle for self-determination. Most importantly, unity between Tamil liberation organisations committed to a common politico-military programme would be an effective shield to confront the politico- diplomatic challenges posed by Rajiv's administration.

Bala eventually succeeded in persuading Mr. Pirabakaran to join the ENLF. He also discussed the matter with the leaders of the constituent organisations of ENLF and they were pleased to embrace the LTTE into their fold. The unity between the organisations was to be a stage by stage development forged over time. Initially the four organisations were to agree on specific political objectives, then work towards the creation of a single military structure and ultimately finance would be bought under a central administrative system. The talks for consolidating the united front led to a historical meeting between the leaders Pirabakaran of LTTE, Sri Sabaratnam from TELO, Padmanaba from EPRLF and Balakumar from EROS. The clandestine meeting was held in a hotel suite in Chennai in April 1985. The four leaders signed the declaration of alliance and a common political programme pledging to fight for the political independence of the Tamil Eelam people.

In the meantime the Indian Foreign Secretary Bhandari's frequent trips to Colombo had paid off. He secured President Jayawardene's agreement for the Sri Lanka government to enter into direct negotiations with the Tamil militant organisations in India. The trade off was that India should stop supporting Tamil militants militarily and oppose their demand for a separate state. While it is true that India supplied military training and arms to the Tamil militant groups it was, as I previously mentioned, part of India's aggressive diplomacy. But on Jayawardene's second condition concerning the Tamil demand for a separate state in the island, India has never shown any sympathy to the secessionist cause. With Bhandari having secured Jayawardene's concurrence to negotiate with the Tamil groups, the Indian government was about to wield the big stick to the armed liberation organisations. Subsequently, following rapidly on the heels of the LTTE becoming part of the ENLF, a cease-fire between the armed Tamil organisations and the Sri Lanka government was mooted in April/May of 1985 and effected in June 1985 to be followed up by negotiations in July/August 1985. The talks were held under the auspices of India in the Bhutan capital Thimpu and its government as the host to the negotiating parties. The Indian sponsored 1985 negotiations between the Tamil political organisations and the Sri Lanka government became known as the 'Thimpu Talks'.

The Thimpu Talks turned out to be a remarkable event in Tamil political history: for the first time, the representatives of all armed Tamil liberation organisations and the moderate political party, the TULF, jointly and unanimously decided to project and seek recognition of the fundamentals of the Tamil national question. The core demands behind the national question the right to self-determination had already been invoked and mandated by the Tamil people in the 1977 general elections. On the basis of that right to political choice, the Tamil representatives enunciated four cardinal principles, which constituted the basis of the ethnic conflict. These are:

1. The Tamil people constitute themselves into a distinct nation or nationality.
2. The Tamils have a historically given homeland, an identifiable territory over which they have an inalienable right.
3. The Tamils, as a nation of people, have the right to self-determination
4. The Tamil people are entitled to all fundamental human rights and civil liberties.

Having called for the recognition of these principles, the Tamil representatives made it absolutely clear to the Sri Lanka Government that any meaningful and lasting solution to the Tamil national question must be based on these fundamentals.

At Thimpu, the Sri Lankan delegation was led not by a senior politician but by Hector Jayawardene, the lawyer brother of President Julius Jayawardene. Responding to the cardinal principles enunciated by the Tamil delegation, Hector Jayawardene refused to accept that the Tamils constituted a nation or that they have a historical homeland or are they entitled to the right to self-determination. Hector further argued that the principles enunciated by the Tamils constituted a negation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka and therefore were wholly unacceptable. The Sri Lanka Government and the Tamil political organisations stuck to their entrenched positions and the talks reached a stage of impasse. Mr. Bhandari,

who functioned as the arbitrator, lacked negotiating skills and the diplomatic sagacity to bring about reconciliation, but rather made some imprudent remarks and was dressed down by Mr. Nadesan Satyendra who represented the TELO at the Thimpu talks.

Bala was in frequent contact through the telephone with Thilakar and Anton, the LTTE representatives participating in the Thimpu talks. A 'hotline' between the Bhutan capital and Chennai was established to enable ENLF leaders in Tamil Nadu to communicate with their delegates. This clandestine 'hot line', of course, meant a direct channel to Indian intelligence eavesdroppers. Bala's access to the 'hot line' proved fateful for us. Knowing that the Indian external intelligence agency, RAW, would be more than curious to hear the nature of the dialogue between the leaders of the ENLF and their representatives in Thimpu, Bala conveyed only messages and avoided any exposition of background thinking to decisions and strategy of the ENLF leadership.

On 17th August 1985, when the negotiations at Thimpu were on the verge of collapse, a brutal massacre occurred in the Northern town of Vavuniya. Sri Lanka military personnel had gone on a wild rampage slaughtering scores of Tamil civilians. It was a serious violation of the cease-fire agreement, which formed the basis of the Thimpu Talks. Mr. Pirabakaran was furious and demanded strong action as a protest. Subsequently, Mr. Pirabakaran and other leaders of the ENLF leadership jointly decided to inform their delegates to walk out of the Thimpu Talks as protest. Bala was asked to convey the message to the ENLF representatives through the 'hot line'. Bala did this. Delegates of all the six Tamil political organisations jointly walked out of the Thimpu Talks resulting in the break down of the negotiations. Delhi was annoyed. The LTTE's political advisor was held responsible by RAW for the collapse of the Thimpu negotiating façade.

Bala's Deportation

With many of our training camps well established in Tamil Nadu, we were aware that should India decide to flex her muscle and use our presence in Tamil Nadu as leverage to exercise politico-diplomatic pressure, we would be in an extremely vulnerable situation. While Romesh Bhandari used the threat of further assistance to the Tamil militants as leverage with Colombo, Delhi used the threat of dismantling of camps and expulsion from Tamil Nadu as sticks to compel the militant groups to talk to Colombo. Prior to the Thimpu talks, the senior officials of the Indian intelligence appropriately intimated this position to the LTTE and other Tamil militant organisations in Delhi. Now that we had walked out of the Thimpu talks and unceremoniously terminated the negotiations, we knew we had earned the displeasure of India. The collapse of the Thimpu talks created a rift between Delhi and the Tamil politico- military organisations. India felt that her mediatory role was undermined and that the Tamil armed organisations had become an irritant to her superpower projection in South Asia. We anticipated that India would show her displeasure by some form of punitive action against us. Bala and I had discussed the scenario prior to the talks and now, after their failure, we wondered

what to expect. Furthermore, we knew that RAW misconstrued Bala's role in communicating messages and instructions from the leadership of the ENLF to its representatives in Thimpu. Shortly afterwards we saw the outcome.

Ironically, we had been discussing over lunch the possibility of us being deported as an option for the Indian government. It was a very hot day and Bala had gone for a brief nap. He had not long woken up, washed, and was preparing to go to the office for the evening when a cavalcade of police jeeps swooped on our flat. Khaki clad policemen jumped out of their vehicles and took up positions, sealing off the exits out of the area. A delegation of police officers mounted the steps and knocked on the door. As is often the case with delicate or unpleasant situations, appropriate persons are handpicked to deliver the bad news. And so Mr. Jumbo Kumar, a friend of Bala's from the Tamil Nadu Intelligence Branch whom we had known since our arrival in Chennai in 1983, had been dispatched, along with the police posse, to provide a semblance of civility to an otherwise hostile act by the Indian state. Mr. Kumar's apologetic and polite tone softened the blow when he informed us that the Government of India had issued a deportation order against Bala. Bala and I looked at each other and he nonchalantly walked out the door like a man resigned to his doom, escorted by officious police officers determined that the order should be carried out. He was to await the next flight to London in police custody.

The arrest of Bala was swift and decisive. The police party arrived at our flat and ushered him out the door and he was gone. There was no mention of my position, so I assumed I was not included in this deportation order. I immediately took an autorickshaw and sped to our political office to inform Mr. Pirabakaran and other senior cadres of the event. Mr. Pirabakaran, away in the training camps, immediately went underground in anticipation of punitive action against him also.

I waited at the political office in Adyar for news of Bala and the time of the deportation. I was naïve enough to believe that the police would implement proper legal procedure and inform me of his whereabouts and so on. But as the darkness started to creep in, so did my concern, for I had not been informed of his whereabouts and my mind began conjuring up worst case scenarios. How could I be sure that, given the politics involved, an 'accident' would not happen and he would not have been killed etc, etc. Fortunately some of the cadres to whom Bala had been giving political classes and working with in the political office, were readily available to help me and proved to be loyal and reliable friends. I waylaid Guru, the young cadre from Trincomalee who came each day to collect us from our house and take us to the political office, and sped to the Headquarters of the 'Q' Branch Police Department in front of Marina beach. It was dark when we arrived and so was my mood. I was not only concerned about the treatment he may be subjected to whilst being held incommunicado, but the fact that he had left the house without his insulin. By the time I arrived at the police intelligence department, I was an angry woman with a mission, fired by determination and fearless to put things to right and find out where Bala was, to demand to see him and to learn of the plans they had for him. This was my first confrontation with the 'authorities' so to speak, and I felt as if I encountered a 'them' and 'us' situation and all my rebellion boiled

inside me. I knew that the police had failed in their obligation and had more or less kidnapped Bala and were holding him incommunicado, and that knowledge infused me with tremendous moral power. Inquiries initially met with a conspiracy of silence. All the policemen and their officers knew whom I was talking about, but inquiries about Bala were met with denials of knowing what had happened and where he was. They passed the buck from one to another. Fortunately for me, I knew who the Intelligence Chief of Police in Tamil Nadu was and how he was literally running the state for the Chief Minister Mr. M G. Ramachandran and that he must, indisputably, have knowledge of what was going on. So when I caught sight of a senior police officer known to me I waylaid him. I told him in no uncertain terms to go and tell his boss, who I believed was in the upstairs office, that he would be accountable if anything untoward happened to Bala and that I intended to call a press conference. I did not have any delusions that threats from me were in themselves effective, but I must have touched a nerve for, after some confabulations upstairs with his bosses, the police officer returned and concurred that Bala was in police custody and would not be released. He agreed that I could deliver Bala's insulin to him, but I too would be held in custody until after Bala was deported. I agreed to this.

From this episode I was able to gain some insight into the anguish, fear and frustration many ordinary people must feel when they are confronted by a conspiracy of silence when they go in search of 'disappeared' at the police stations or perhaps in army camps, which is more the case in Sri Lanka.

I immediately jumped into a waiting police car and was driven home. I collected Bala's insulin and a few clothes, and was taken to the place where he was being held in custody. To my surprise his 'prison cell' was a room in a remote two story modern house on the outskirts of Chennai. I was puzzled as to why the police would be using unofficial residences in which to imprison him, but experience has since taught me that intelligence agencies and the police often use nameless houses for illegal interrogation purposes. As we approached the house I was amazed to see hundreds of policemen guarding the building and the area. Inside the house also, policemen were everywhere. I found Bala alone in an upstairs room. He was not distressed or worried, but he was glad to see me and had been concerned that he did not have his insulin with him. He had not been harmed in anyway; in fact it was quite the opposite. He had been well cared for by his embarrassed friend, Inspector Jumbo Kumar, who was a frequent visitor and provided him with whatever he required. In conversation he commented that the heavy security was a precaution against a possible LTTE raid on the house to rescue Bala.

The earliest flight to London was the next evening so we hung around in custody until a few hours before his departure when I was once again taken home to find Bala's passport and to pack some clothes for him. It had been suggested that I could travel with him but I refused: I had no wish to leave either Tamil Nadu or the struggle and since I was not issued with a deportation order I decided not to go.

I felt that Bala's deportation order was an expression of India's displeasure over the collapse of the Thimpu Talks and that he would be called back if Rajiv's administration was seriously concerned about a negotiated settlement. Bala also encouraged me to remain behind, assuring

me that he would be returning to India within a couple of weeks. Just prior to his departure to the airport, Bala requested Inspector Kumar to allow him to visit the LTTE's political office to send an important message to Pirabakaran who had gone underground. At the political office Bala held a brief meeting with the LTTE cadres while the police were guarding the building. He explained to the anxious cadres the reasons behind the deportation and advised them on the campaign for his recall. Bala also sent a message to Pirabakaran through a secret channel. Thereafter we left for the airport followed by a convoy of police and LTTE vehicles.

On the following morning almost all the Indian national newspapers, both English and Tamil editions, highlighted Bala's deportation. Newspaper reports were sympathetic towards the LTTE. Some editorials were critical of Rajiv's administration for the 'hasty, imprudent action'. Soon after Bala's expulsion from India, Tamil Nadu political parties took up the issue. Mass demonstrations were organised protesting Bala's deportation and demanding his return.

The collapse of the Thimpu talks, Bala's deportation and Pirabakaran's retreat underground effectively put an end to future negotiations with Sri Lanka - a situation India had not bargained for - unless Bala was returned to India. Mr. Pirabakaran, as well as the other leaders of the ENLF, demanded the return of Bala if a dialogue with India or Sri Lanka was to be re-initiated. And so Indian intelligence agencies sent messages of reassurance to me that Bala would return to India soon. Finally the Indian High Commission in London issued a visa and an air ticket for him to fly to Delhi. In the meantime, Indian officials arranged for me to travel to Delhi to meet him.

Although Bala had returned, the relationship between India and the LTTE was strained, with a deepening distrust of India's intentions. Asserting itself as a regional superpower, India consistently aimed to subjugate the LTTE to its strategic and national interests. Nevertheless, aware of this tenuous situation, the LTTE continued its activities in India. Sri Lanka too pursued its aggressive strategy. On one hand, Jayawardene pretended to backup India's aspiration for a negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict. But on the other hand he systematically strengthened the Sri Lankan military machine for major military offensive operations in the Tamil homeland. In the meantime, we remained ignorant of a nefarious plan being hatched by a government Minister in Sri Lanka: the assassination of Balasingham. The attempt on Bala's life which took place on December 23rd 1985, came three months after the revocation of his deportation order, capping a hectic year for us and teaching us many more lessons about the desperate and unscrupulous nature of the satanic forces we were confronted with.

The Assassination Attempt

Part of any counter insurgency strategy by an oppressive state is the option of assassination of the leaders of the opposing freedom movement. Bala and I often discussed this rather ruthless and desperate tactic operated by states throughout the world. In this context retrospectively it was rather foolish on our part not to be more alert to potential assassination attempts. Mr. Pirabakaran lives with the threat and adapts his security to prevent it. But Bala, perhaps

rather too modestly, did not consider himself important enough for anyone to take the time to plot and kill him. If they did, he felt, then that was part of the struggle. He, personally, has never been overly concerned about his security and left it for others to attend to. It was in this rather negligent and unguarded atmosphere the attempt on his life was made. The plot was hatched by Lalith Athulathmudali, the former Sri Lankan Minister of National Security and a close confidante of President Jayawardene.

Ironically, Bala had personally known the perpetrator of the attempt on his life ever since the assassin arrived in Chennai in 1984. Kandasamy was his name, an ex-Sri Lankan intelligence officer. He was one of those unprincipled persons who use and are used by people to get and plant information for his many masters. I call them 'intelligence prostitutes'. He imposed himself on Bala during his strolls on the Besant Nagar beach. From the nature of the discussions with him, Bala guessed that he was a double agent. But although Bala strongly suspected the integrity of this person it was only after the assassination bid did Bala correlate this man's background and the attempt on his life. Indeed it was Bala's correct judgement of this man's character that led to him being taken in for questioning by the Tamil Nadu Special Branch (Intelligence) officers during which he broke down and confessed and was charged with attempted murder.

This is how it happened. About two weeks before the assassination I was sweeping at the front door of our flat. I noticed a beautifully dressed young woman going up the next flight of steps from our floor to the roof of our flat. She was startled when she saw me and asked if anyone was living upstairs. When I replied in the negative and that there was only the roof upstairs, she turned around and walked nonchalantly down the steps and out of the entrance door of the block of flats. This was the first time I had ever seen anyone going up the stairs past our flat to the roof. Not even the owners of the two-storey block, who lived downstairs, used the roof or came near our flat. I thought this was out of the normal and in petty conversation of the day's events, commented to Bala the incident of an unknown, beautiful girl on the staircase. He didn't take the incident seriously.

A similar situation occurred on the previous evening of the day of the bomb blast. I was home alone at around 7pm. I was expecting Bala home from the political office when I heard somebody walking on the steps. I peered out through the glass peephole in the door and saw a young woman proceeding up the staircase to the roof. "That's strange", I thought to myself, "Perhaps the people from downstairs are taking something to the roof". I went into my room to attend to some matters, where I heard the downstairs gate squeak. Thinking Bala must have arrived home I looked out the window to see if it was him. To my surprise I saw this young woman leaving the flat. But what raised my curiosity was the direction she turned after going out of the gate. If she had been visiting the family downstairs, she would have turned to their door. But this woman turned in the opposite direction and disappeared into the dark. Bala arrived home not long afterwards and I once again relayed the story. I was not frightened, nor did I think this young woman was carrying out reconnaissance work for an assassin. I merely thought it odd behaviour. The plot thickened, when, at about ten o'clock at night I heard the door to the roof banging in the wind. The door only has a lock from the inside and I always

kept this door locked precisely so it wouldn't bang at night and as a form of security. I then realised this young woman had entered the building and opened this door. In doing so she made it possible to get the block of flats from the servants entrance at the back of the building. In other words, it was possible for anyone to reach the roof by climbing the steps at the back of the block. The unlocked door at the roof permitted entrance into the block of flats, to our front door, then down the steps and out through the ground floor entrance which also had an inside lock only. I asked my nephew who was living with us to go upstairs and lock the door; which he did.

On the morning of the assassination attempt our faithful pup Jimmy uncharacteristically started to bark and jump up at one of the windows. I got up and looked at the time; it was precisely 5.55a.m. I went over to the dog and patted her. The dog then jumped back up on her chair and kept quiet. I looked out the window to see what was causing her such concern. I couldn't see anything; but I did hear the gate squeak. I attributed the disturbance to some of our cadres coming for early morning exercise on the beach and leaving their bicycles downstairs. There was a chill in the air so I took a bed sheet and covered Bala and then laid down again myself. I was lying there in a wonderfully relaxing half sleep at 6 o'clock in the morning listening to the chanting from the temple over the loudspeaker when the whole world seemed to explode. Our flat shook and I could see the windows shattering; smoke and dust filled the room; Jimmy ran for her life. My first thoughts were "My God the gas cylinder has exploded". As I got up, I could hear the tinkle of broken glass all around me from the shattered windows. I looked at Bala. The bed sheet I had covered him with was now heavy with broken glass and had him pinned down. The shattered glass window had flown over me - closest to the window and landed on Bala. I peeled back the sheet, wrapping the glass as I did so. With some disbelief we went to the sitting room to see what had happened. Smoke and dust clouded the air and rubbish littered everything. I then realised there had been bomb blast. My nephew, visibly shocked, covered from head to toe in white dust, wandered around in a daze. He received the full impact: the bomb had gone off on the roof directly above his room. Only one week earlier, we had exchanged rooms so we could have the beach view. Since we were still alive I wondered if the assassins hadn't planted another bomb as a contingency plan, and we stood in the sitting room waiting to be blown away with another explosion. I also shouted not to go out; the assassin could have been waiting to shoot us if we ran out. Within a few minutes uniformed police were mounting the staircase and the public had gathered outside. Our cadres informed Mr. Pirabakaran who had heard the blast at his home, several kilometres from our flat.

Obviously, the assassin had come up the back steps, onto the roof and, finding the door to the flats locked, panicked and placed the time-bomb on the roof before fleeing in the direction he had come. If the door at the roof had been open, as the female reconnoitre had arranged, the assassin would have entered the flats, placed the bomb in front of our door and proceeded down the steps, unlocked the door to the entrance to a get away motor bike.

Interestingly, a few days before this operation, the potential assassin had asked to meet Bala alone on the beach in front of our house at 10 p.m. It was Mr. Pirabakaran who advised him

either not to go or to take a cadre with him. Bala was escorted by one of our cadres; otherwise I have no doubt he would never have returned from the beach rendezvous.

When the dust had settled, the smoke cleared and the initial shock was over we had a look at the damage done to the flat. All the windows were broken; the doors were gone. Every wall had a crack of a different degree. But it was in our nephew's bedroom the full impact of the blast was revealed. The force of the explosion had torn away mesh wire and iron bar structural work and about a one- foot thickness of cement to create a four-foot diameter hole revealing the sky through the ceiling. The staircase was also badly damaged. A huge hole in the wall had been blown away. Had the assassin successfully placed the bomb in front of our door, the entire structure would have collapsed, killing not only us by the family living downstairs also.

People from all over Tamil Nadu visited us to express their concern. Hundreds of people passed through our house immediately after the incident. The leaders of all the organisations, EPRLF's Padmanaba, Sri Sabaratnam from TELO, Bala Kumar from EROS, Sidharthan from PLOTE, Mr. Sivasithampuram from TULF came as a show of Tamil solidarity. The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Mr. G. Ramachandran was to visit us, but for security reasons cancelled his visit. The police began their investigation. They heard my story and showed me a fair woman for identification. The investigation took a different turn with the police suspecting the explosion to be an internal job by the LTTE. Eventually, at Bala's suggestion, the real culprit was put under observation and was caught making a telephone call to his Sinhalese boss in Colombo - Lalith Athulathmudali. The potential assassin was taken in for questioning and, in a fit of guilt, broke down and told the story. His female accomplice was his niece.

The offender remained in custody in the Chennai central jail for many months. All efforts undertaken by the state police to register a case of attempted murder were frustrated by the authorities of the Central government since it implicated a senior Minister of Jayawardene's cabinet, with far reaching implications in the interstate relations. Both the Governments colluded in hushing up the entire episode and Mr. Kandasamy was eventually released and mysteriously vanished to Sri Lanka to live in peace and without the stamp of criminality.

The LTTE had to pay for the huge reconstruction work on the flat but that was not enough to convince the landlord to allow us to remain in his very suitable accommodation. The owner lived downstairs with his small children and they continued to tremble and live in fear after the blast. Understandably, landlords in Chennai were not too comfortable about renting their property to the Balasinghams after the bomb blast. Eventually a Muslim family was courageous enough to do so. Our new accommodation was conveniently located near the political office and surrounded by our cadres. But this new residence once again exposed me to new experiences in India.

Domestic Labour in India

Throughout this book I have occasionally briefly touched on incidences or narrated observations which have indicated widespread social contradictions and poverty in Tamil Nadu. Apart from the middle classes and the wealthy who live in their own houses and rented apartments in the cities, the majority of the poor live in villages and urban shanties. Socio-economic deprivation and hardship condemns millions of people in Tamil Nadu to live in the limited accommodation of small thatched huts. There are no bedrooms or kitchens or bathrooms in these huts. They are just one-room structures where the family cooks, eats and sleeps. There is no gas supply or electricity either. Shrubs, bushes or long grass either conveniently growing out the back of the hut or within walking distance, constitute the toilet. Domestic rubbish quite often litters the surrounding environment. Within this poverty and squalor, women struggle to maintain their dignity and keep their families alive. Compounding these difficult conditions of existence is the unavailability of immediate access to a water supply in the hut. Most of these families acquire their daily water needs from a common water pump in the area and, in general, fetching water is woman's work. Women are inducted into this domestic chore at a very young age. Indeed it is not uncommon to see girls as young as six or seven pumping water and carrying the pots home. Queuing and pumping water eats into women's time and patience. If, as is often the case in summer, the water supply is insufficient to meet the needs of the local population, women are compelled to search the neighbourhood for access to a water supply. Groups of poor women in search of water would often gather at our front gate and ask to use the water pump in the front compound of our house. In summer, middle class families too are affected by the water shortage and have no option but to search for water or to wait for a bowser to deliver rationed water supplies to the neighbourhood.

The problem of an adequate, clean water supply is critical in India. It is very common for rural women to trek long distances for a few pots of drinking water. So, during the earliest days of our visits to Tamil Nadu, we became aware of the potential of water in determining the quality and standard of living in Chennai. It goes without saying that when we went to live permanently in Tamil Nadu, one of our first priorities when looking for accommodation was to inquire about the water supply to the house and in the area. Armed with knowledge of this social problem we were able to find accommodation with a reliable water supply and I was spared the incessant concern of many women to maintain this basic amenity in the house. But our residence after the bomb blast was in an area where the water supply was often unreliable and in short supplies, particularly in the long hot summer months. So it was not long after moving to the new house that a plethora of problems associated with water supply began to affect on the quality of my life.

Although I considered myself to be highly privileged to have a hand water pump in the front compound of the house, the supply was erratic and would gradually decline with the creeping intensity of India's summer. Early into the summer months, the water supply to our house was reduced to half an hour a day during which time I would gather all the water pots and hand pump water and store it for the day's domestic use. Needless to say there was no running

water in either the kitchen or the bathroom. And it was only when I was deprived of an endless supply of running water that I understood how these taken-for-granted resources and conveniences impact on our life style and standard of living. Trivial as it may seem to the reader, it is quite extraordinary how a taken for granted resource such as water can become a major issue, occupying the mind as one ponders strategies to preserve water and employs cooking and cleaning procedures so that the one bucket of water set aside for cooking is used thriftily. All sorts of washing up techniques also are applied to learn which is the best method for washing the dishes and cleaning the kitchen with the limited amount of water available. Ultimately the easiest strategy was to carry the dirty pots and pans outside, sit on a low stool, soap the utensils and then rinse them and let them dry in the hot sun before returning and stacking them in the kitchen.

Added to our problems was the upstairs bathroom to where water had to be hauled. It was quite amazing to learn how single bucket of water can be sufficient for personal washing. But at least with this one bucket I was fortunate enough to be able to douse myself daily from the searing heat. In general, although my life was made less comfortable by the water problem, I was indeed privileged in comparison with the plight of millions of women in India, who invest a great deal of time and energy in acquiring this basic amenity for their families.

But with or without a water problem, domestic work in India is, in my view, laborious. Cooking, for example, is labour intensive and extremely menial work for women. Scraping coconuts, peeling small onions, dicing meat, cleaning fish, finely chopping vegetables, cooking and draining rice are time consuming aspects of cooking and bore one to death from the monotonous and repetitive nature of the preparation. The duration of cooking is compounded by the fact that, in all likelihood, one has to use a gas cylinder stove with only two jets; one jet will be used for half an hour to cook the rice (depending on the quality of the rice) leaving only one remaining jet to cook the main dishes. The other option is a firewood stove with one, two, or, if one is lucky, three cooking places. But the actual cooking of the meal is only part of the preparation of food, which is women's main responsibility. Added to this list of necessities of food preparation, is the washing and drying of rice for grinding or pounding, the browning of ingredients in chilli powder preparations, the primary cooking of flour for special dishes, the soaking of grains, the grinding of food between two stones (ammi) as complimentary dishes to the main course and so on.

During our years in India, we had no access to washing machines either. Our clothes were washed at home by hand in cold water: except when I felt lazy and couldn't be bothered with washing or being concerned about the water supply. I abandoned my concern and gave my dresses and Bala's shirts to a lady who visited the house on certain days of the week to gather the clothes and take them for washing. My only worry was whether or not the clothes would be washed in shallow ponds of dirty water and the risk of infection that entailed. But the clothes were always returned to me washed, ironed and neatly folded and I was happy enough with that. Added to all this was the daily shopping for the fresh vegetables, fish or meat. These extremely petty, routine and boring domestic chores place an enormous burden on women's time, energy, and mental development and condemns her to a life of basic survival. So there were many times

when I reflected on Marx's axiom, that it is social conditions which determine consciousness, and concluded he was absolutely right. The drudgery and persistence of domestic labour allows little space for 'higher' thoughts to creep in. This experience of everyday domestic work in India brought with it a greater understanding as to why many women, if they have the resources, prefer to employ domestic servants. I often dreamed of a competent housekeeper to whom I could entrust everything; but I never had one. As a feminist I was fiercely opposed in principle to employing a female servant. The very idea of using another woman to cook and clean up my dirt and rubbish was repugnant to me. It has been my position that all the members of a household should share in their own domestic work. Secondly, I had no wish to exploit the labour of these very poor women by paying them the pittance they usually earn as domestic servants. Furthermore, in my view, the employment of a small girl as domestic help for even less money, which many people do, was totally unacceptable. Indeed one of the major contradictions I observed early every morning as I sat and drank my tea on the verandah, was to see many small girls between the age of six to ten years going to their domestic servant work, while, on the other hand, little girls from wealthier families would be setting off in their crisp clean uniforms to school. The contradiction is glaring when we observe a situation where a small girl domestic servant arrives at a house early in the morning to help cook the breakfast of her contemporary who is preparing to leave for school. The small domestic servant will, in all likelihood, then wash the uniform and clothes of her school going employer.

Strained Relations

Though the Indian sponsored Thimpu Talks of August 1985 failed to bring the Sri Lanka government and the Tamil militant organisations any closer to a negotiated settlement, India persisted with her diplomatic efforts to find a political solution to the ethnic conflict. Several sojourns to Colombo by Indian Ministers and officials resulted in conferences and dialogues with the Sinhala leaders and the working and re-working of ideas and proposals for constitutional change in Sri Lanka. In the meantime, the relationship between Delhi and the LTTE never returned to the 1983 days. While Delhi was displeased with the collapse of the Thimpu talks, the LTTE became increasingly sceptical over Delhi's moves following Bala's deportation and its relationship with Colombo. A determining indication that the LTTE and other militant organisations no longer enjoyed or could rely on the patronage of Tamil Nadu and Delhi was adequately demonstrated by a major 'security' operation undertaken by the Tamil Nadu police led by the D.I.G. Mohandas on November 8th 1986.

Already the Tamil Nadu Police and Intelligence agencies were nervous and apprehensive over the growing number of armed cadres of Tamil militant organisations and their freedom of mobility displaying lethal weapons. Though the LTTE maintained a high level of discipline in Tamil Nadu and had a good public relations record, there were incidences of violence perpetrated by other armed groups that annoyed the state police. A major incident of violence that compelled the Tamil Nadu Police to take serious action took place on the 1st November 1986 at Choolaimedu, in the heart of Chennai. In a minor altercation with an autorickshaw

driver a senior leader of the EPRLF, Douglas Devananda (now a Minister in the Sri Lanka government) sprayed automatic rifle fire, instantly killing a young Tamil lawyer and injuring scores of other civilians. The incident caused an outcry in Tamil Nadu and the media demanded urgent punitive action. For D.I.G Mohandas, Head of Tamil Nadu Intelligence and the prime guardian of law and order of the M.G.R administration, the incident was an opportune moment to crack down on the Tamil militants from Sri Lanka. This shooting incident, coupled with a request from central government's Home Ministry for stringent security arrangements for the forthcoming SAARC conference to be held in the neighbouring state of Karanartaka at which the Sri Lankan President J.R.Jayawardene would attend, provided the impetus for sweeping, draconian disarming operations against the Sri Lankan Tamil militant organisations. Although the LTTE cadres were not in anyway involved in this tragic death of the young lawyer, the population generally classified all militant organisations as 'Tigers'. So the disarming operation of the Sri Lankan militant organisations on 8th November 1986 by the Tamil Nadu police became perniciously known as 'Operation Tiger'.

It was around 6.a.m when we saw a posse of police barge through our front gate. The haste in their movements indicated something serious was underway. We had no idea of what was happening or why they had come, but we guessed by the aggressive invasion of our private residence that it was not a friendly act towards us. Sensing that we might be arrested, I quickly rushed to hide my pistol to prevent it from being confiscated. I grabbed it and threw it on the roof, hoping to reclaim it later on. Once inside the house the police officers proceeded, without permission, to search the house. The house was thoroughly combed. My parents, over from Australia on a visit, stood and gaped as the swarms of police unapologetically occupied and took over the house, preventing anyone from coming or going. They stood aghast as the police tipped out the contents of their suitcases and bags and rummaged through their possessions. They had either read or heard about these things happening to other people but never dreamed that they themselves would be exposed to such heavy handed police tactics. Naturally enough, their opinion of the Tamil Nadu police force quickly diminished. We still had no idea what they were searching for, since at this stage our house was not used for the storing of weapons or explosives. Outside the house, we could see that police vehicles and contingents of policemen had cordoned off the entire area and a massive search was underway in all the LTTE residences. A state wide dawn sweep on all the camps of the militant groups was in full swing. Having completed their search of our house and found only the pistol I used for personal security, the police officer in charge asked Bala to accompany him to the police station. At the local police office, Bala was extremely humiliated and belittled when the police took mug shots and fingerprints of him. Mr. Pirabakaran was subjected to the same humiliating treatment at a different police station following his being taken into custody under similar conditions. After several hours of questioning, Bala and Pirabakaran were allowed to return home but were immediately placed under house arrest. A group of police with rifles at their side took up positions in the driveway of the house and Bala was permitted to see visitors, but was not allowed to leave the house. The same conditions were clamped on Mr. Pirabakaran. This, they argued, was for Bala's 'security'. Security from whom and why at this stage when he had already been the target of an assassination attempt they failed to explain.

Both Bala and Mr Pirabakaran were outraged and disappointed at what they construed as a deliberate act of intimidation and harassment by both Tamil Nadu and Delhi. None of us was naïve enough to believe that such a major police operation with far reaching political implications could be undertaken without both the state and Central authorities having knowledge of it. Although political differences had often figured in the relationship between the LTTE and Delhi, such aggressive police action, in the LTTE's perception, was unwarranted. Any security concerns could have been discussed and suitable arrangements arrived at. The nature of this aggressive action against the LTTE and its leaders indicated the shallow understanding the police intelligence had of both Bala and Pirabakaran. Had the Tamil Nadu police any deeper insight into the Jaffna psyche, they would have known that such humiliation, rather than intimidating and cowing down Bala and Pirabakaran, would have bruised their pride and dignity and made them defiant, defensive and hostile - which it did. Furthermore, such action certainly confirmed many of the suspicions both Bala and Pirabakaran already entertained concerning India's commitment to the Tamil people and Delhi's real intentions. Nevertheless, one week later, the policemen on guard in front of our house suddenly picked up their belongings and left as quickly as they had come and the house arrest was lifted, without an explanation from anyone.

Intensified diplomatic efforts between Delhi and Colombo to work out a political solution to the ethnic conflict in time for an announcement of a breakthrough at the SAARC conference in Bangalore had been underway for months prior to the summit. Propelling these efforts was an aspiration on Rajiv Gandhi's part to gain political capital at the SAARC summit, which an announcement of a breakthrough would certainly have yielded. Proposals which included a plan for trifurcating the Eastern Province were put forward by Sri Lanka along with various suggestions for devolution. The Indian and Sri Lankan officials carried this totally unacceptable proposal to Bangalore and Bala and Pirabakaran were shuttled to the capital to discuss the issue. 'Proximity talks' on the proposals failed to produce the expected announcement of a breakthrough. The talks became known as the 'Bangalore Talks'. Mr. M.G. Ramachandran, the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister was brought in to assert his moral influence over the LTTE delegation, while the Indian Foreign Secretary, Mr. Venkadeswaran, a Tamil was involved to persuade the Tigers with the logic of rational dialogue. The LTTE found the proposals totally unacceptable and refused to discuss them with Sri Lankan leaders. Contrary to popular belief, Mr. M.G. Ramachandran agreed with the explanation provided by the LTTE delegation for the rejection of the proposals.

The failure of the Bangalore Talks deprived Rajiv Gandhi of the political accolades that would have come his way had he announced a diplomatic scoop in the political search for a solution to the ethnic conflict at the summit. On the contrary, he was considerably embarrassed when Jayawardene decided to use the summit platform to deliver a lengthy peroration on India's support for 'terrorism'; referring of course, to India's covert support for the armed Tamil liberation organisations.

The LTTE's uncompromising rejection of the political proposals put forward as a basis for a solution, severely disappointed the Indian government and was a contributing factor to a

further shift in India's relations with the LTTE. The Indian Government and Intelligence agencies with the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister's knowledge opted to send a clear, unequivocal message of their disapproval to the LTTE and to indicate to all the militant organisations that their stay in India could not be taken for granted. The Indian government, with the co-operation of the Tamil Nadu intelligence agencies and police force, launched a second crucial operation to seize vital LTTE communication equipment.

Deepening Crisis

The confiscation of Mr. Pirabakaran's communication line to the North-east of Sri Lanka as an expression of India's disapproval of the LTTE's rejection of the political proposals at Bangalore, dealt a further blow to LTTE - Delhi relationship. This was, literally, the straw that broke the camel's back concerning Pirabakaran's perception of India's intentions, and ultimately led to a deep-seated scepticism on all matters related to India as far as he was concerned.

While Bala and Mr. Pirabakaran were conscious of India's displeasure at the outcome of the Bangalore dialogue, they in turn were dejected and deeply disappointed with India's political expectations of them. A trifurcation of the Eastern Province - one of the proposals mooted - in the Tamil homeland, was the antithesis of their aspiration for recognition of the North and East as a single Tamil territorial entity. If Delhi could be supportive of such a Sri Lankan proposition to divide the Eastern Province, Bala and Pirabakaran assumed the gap between India's expectations and the LTTE's goal was irreconcilably wide. The move to confiscate Mr. Pirabakaran's communication equipment after the Bangalore Talks further substantiated their concerns and soured the already strained relationship.

Mr. Pirabakaran thundered into our house for consultation with Bala after news of the seizure of his equipment reached him. He was furious with Delhi for taking such a dramatic and damaging decision and annoyed with Chief Minister M.G.Ramachandran for permitting the police to embark on the operation. Furthermore, this action against him led to a conviction that in future his life could be in jeopardy. But his primary concern was to retrieve his communication equipment before he made the move to dismantle his camps and return to Jaffna. That unshakeable and irreconcilable defiance so characteristic of Mr. Pirabakaran's personality, welled up in him and he decided to fast unto death demanding the return of his equipment. His large, dark protruding eyes were aglow with fury as he launched his tirade against India and vowed that only his dead body would leave our house if India refused to return his equipment. From that moment onwards he launched a fast unto death in our residence and neither food nor water passed his lips. Bala could do nothing in the face of such dogged determination but at the same time sympathised with Pirabakaran's point of view. Tamil Nadu politicians, political activists, journalists and supporters from all walks of life visited our house in their droves, offering their support to Pirabakaran. Some of his commanders pleaded to join him in protest. Demonstrations in support of his fast and criticising the Tamil Nadu

government and Delhi started to gather momentum and crowds often gathered in front of our house chanting their approval of his action.

The Chief Minister, M.G.Ramachandran, was in Salem, several hundred miles from Chennai, when Pirabakaran's equipment was seized. Faced with a potentially explosive situation, both he and Delhi denied knowledge of the incident and shifted the blame on to each other. M.G.R was disturbed to learn that Pirabakaran, whom he loved and respected, had embarked on a fast-unto-death campaign as protest. He also knew that the Tiger leader was deadly serious if he had taken such a course of action. Already there was mounting opposition from wider sections of the Tamils to the state Government's provocative action. He also was aware that there would be far reaching political implications if anything happened. to the legendary hero of the Eelam Tamils. On the second day of the fast, there was an urgent call to Bala from the Chief Minister. M.G.R. pleaded with Bala to persuade Mr. Pirabakaran to give up the fast and that he would later meet the LTTE leader to explain the reason for the police action. Bala told the Chief Minister bluntly that the Tiger leader would never give up his fast until and unless the communication equipment was returned. M.G.R realised the seriousness of the issue and ordered the immediate return of the seized equipment. A weary, but committed and defiant Mr. Pirabakaran ended his fast forty-eight hours later, amidst wide press coverage, the patronage of local politicians and a large crowd of supporters. Several weeks later, the Chief Minister, having had a lengthy discussion with Pirabakaran and Bala, ordered the return of all the confiscated weapons of the Tigers - as well as the weapons of the other militant organisations - to the LTTE.

Within a matter of weeks after the fast, Mr. Pirabakaran, always a firm advocate of self reliance in the struggle, had finalised plans to sever the patronage of India and to re-establish their independent existence in Jaffna. In the early part of 1987 he secretly left the shores of India to return to his homeland. Bala and I were asked to stay in Chennai to carry on with the political work until the time came for our departure. This long and often bitter experience in dealing with the arm-twisting and aggressive diplomacy of Rajiv's administration inculcated within the ranks of the LTTE, a clear vision of the intricacies of the Indian political system. The prospects for a negotiated political settlement of the conflict mediated by India - in the near future seemed out of the question. As 1987 unfolded it proved to be the momentous and turbulent year in the history of the Tamil political struggle since the anti-Tamil riots of 1983. It was during this period, the Indian intervention took an unexpected and devastating turn with profound implications on the psyche and politics of the Sri Lankan Tamils.

4 The Indo LTTE War

“Is that noise thunder?” I queried from one of the cadres staying with us in our Valvettiturai house in Jaffna, as I stood at the veranda trying to correlate the cloudless morning sky and the distant rumble reaching my ears. “No Auntie”, he replied with a tone of dismay in his voice, “that’s the Indians. They’re shelling Jaffna town from Pallaly army camp”. And the rumble of artillery shells pounding Jaffna town filled the air for days. How the tables had turned from the days of the Indian Army providing military training to our cadres, to now, when they were deploying their military weaponry and expertise against us. An unexpected twist of events: one of the vicissitudes of the Asian political theatre. An all out war between the LTTE and the Indian ‘Peacekeeping’ Force was the culmination of the often stormy, contradictory and suspicious relationship between LTTE and Delhi since the Chennai days. It was October 1987.

When we reflect on this particular era in the protracted and tumultuous history of the Tamil people’s struggle for freedom, we do so with mixed and indeed, contradictory sentiments. Apart from the divergent and essentially contradictory political interests India, Sri Lanka and the LTTE had in the Tamil homeland during this period, with the benefit of hindsight the cause of the war can be attributed to a catalogue of misunderstandings and apprehensions. Nevertheless, regardless of the assertions and counter assertions apportioning blame, essentially it was the Tamil people who faced the brunt of this ruthless war. Furthermore, while indisputably the human and material losses to the nation were phenomenal and irreplaceable, it is to the enduring credit of the people of Tamil Eelam that they stood firm as a nation under siege, refusing to be cowed, revealing during this crisis period in their history, truly astounding and commendable resilience and ingenuity, a fathomless strength and remarkable courage in the face of a merciless and brutal foe.

A series of tragic events occurred which, on one hand awakened the collective consciousness and mobilised the national sentiments of the people towards political emancipation, but on the other hand generated serious misunderstanding and contradictions between the IPKF and the LTTE leading to a fractious and hostile relationship between them. I shared the collective anger and pain over the unnecessary and avoidable deaths of some of the leading and popular LTTE cadres who were not only war heroes but our closest colleagues also. Nevertheless, despite these profoundly tragic national incidents it remained inconceivable how the relationship between the guerrilla organisation and the regional superpower, commanding one of the largest armies in the world, had deteriorated from a level of irretrievable dialogue into an all out military confrontation. Subsequently the explosion of armed hostilities between the Tamil Tigers and the Indian peace keeping troops on the 10th October 1987 stunned the Tamil nation.

At the initial stages of the outbreak of the war, all we could hear in Valvettiturai, where I was living, was the incessant artillery fire. The intensity and the magnitude of the conflict were not yet visible to us. We were totally ignorant of the Indian army's abortive attempt to land at the Jaffna University sports grounds in pursuit of Mr. Pirabakaran or their thrusts towards Jaffna town in different directions from the Pallaly army camp. But as the days passed, disturbing news of growing numbers of civilian and LTTE casualties started to filter through. Indeed it was the incessant rumble of artillery fire and the news of growing casualty figures that drove home the point and dispelled any hopes we all had that the situation could be retrieved. Bala was in Jaffna town when the hostilities broke out. I was only able to gain a clear picture of the war situation and the developments before and after its outbreak when he, along with a few cadres, managed to escape from the Indian military encirclement of Jaffna and returned to our residence in Valvettiturai. He was emotionally and intellectually exhausted when he returned home and profoundly dismayed and disappointed over the calamitous developments. Bala had been intensely involved in all engagements between the LTTE, Indian diplomats and military commanders and he was able to gauge that the political situation was fast deteriorating and a military confrontation seemed inevitable. But it was not a war he wanted and he did what he could, utilising his diplomatic skills and powers of persuasion to the maximum, in trying to avoid a war with India. Unfortunately and tragically, the events - and reactions to events - unfolded, inexorably leading to a confrontation between the LTTE and the Indian Peace Keeping Force. We both understood the long-term implications a war would have, not only on future Indo-LTTE relations and the struggle, but more immediately for the war weary Tamil people also. It was yet another devastating setback for them.

Although the Jaffna population's expectations and image of the IPKF and Delhi had been fractured by events beyond their control, when the armed conflict actually exploded the very fact that the Indian army deploying their lethal weaponry on them was just incredulous. Mentally and emotionally, the people were not prepared to condone such hard-line military action. They were able to comprehend the hatred and racism of their historic enemy, the Sinhalese, but when a loved and culturally and ethnically related neighbour behaved in the manner of a deadly foe, the reaction of the people was one of bitter betrayal and utter disbelief. Faced with the political and military violence of decades of Sinhala state repression and protracted war, the Tamil people were enjoying a brief period of peace under the cease-fire effected by the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. They were shattered by the outbreak of a war with India which, they fully understood, would have far reaching consequences for them and for their struggle. In Valvettiturai, the people gathered quietly and solemnly in small groups on street corners and in homes contemplating the phenomenal tragedy befalling them. LTTE contingents stationed in Vadamarachchi had been mobilised for the battlefronts in Jaffna town and could be seen marching, in single file, their rifles over their shoulders. A few panic-stricken people were running here and there, desperate to find ways of learning what had become of their relatives in Jaffna town. Rumour was rife with stories of heavy fighting between the LTTE cadres and the Indian army; of huge numbers of civilian casualties; of houses and property reduced to rubble and of streets jam-packed with panic stricken people fleeing to safety.

At the end of the day, two and a half years later, when the Indian army was compelled to

vacate the Tamil homeland by an extraordinary turn of events, Delhi - to be more precise Rajiv's administration was guilty of crimes against humanity, of the senseless slaughter of 6,000 Tamil civilians, the inestimable destruction of their hard earned property, the arrest, detention and torture of thousands of people and the gang raping of countless Tamil women. To put it succinctly, the Indian Peacekeeping Force had behaved like yet another ruthless army of occupation in the Tamil homeland. To this day, Delhi has failed to satisfactorily explain to the Tamil people why it was necessary to perpetrate such mass slaughter and wide scale destruction of property. An ironic twist in this tragic saga is that despite this painful historic betrayal made by their powerful neighbour, the Tamil people are conscious that India should remain a friendly ally and a crucial player in the determination of their political future.

The outbreak of the Indo-LTTE War was the outcome of the cumulative effects of the politico-military events of a most momentous year, a year of monumental tragedies in the history of the Tamil struggle. The year was 1987.

Sri Lanka's Military Onslaught

When Mr. Pirabakaran left the shores of India in January 1987, he did so with a bitter taste in his mouth concerning India's aggressive diplomacy. Yet he could not possibly have known that the unfriendly scenario he was leaving behind him, would be superseded by even more critical and hostile situations for the struggle and with India in the future. Nor could we. But we were aware that neither India nor Sri Lanka would allow the political and military situation to drift. Attempts at political negotiations had failed and the LTTE had intensified its military campaign. Mr. Pirabakaran also had his own perceptions of how he wished to conduct the struggle after his return to Jaffna. But it was not long before a new and grave scenario began to unfold as a consequence of political developments and military operations. Soon after his arrival in Jaffna, Mr. Pirabakaran informed us that the Sri Lankan army had embarked on a massive mobilisation of troops in preparation for a major military offensive in the Peninsula. We were deeply concerned that such retaliatory military operations by the Sri Lankan forces into the densely populated areas of the Jaffna Peninsula would result in large-scale civilian casualties. Along with the plan of military invasion, the Sinhala government also imposed a ruthless economic embargo on the North that brought untold suffering to the people. In its war with LTTE, the Sri Lanka government had drawn on the counter insurgency expertise of the Israelis. Central to their counter insurgency tactics was the objective of depriving the movement of their popular support by attempting to drive a wedge between the guerrillas and the people. In pursuit of this objective, the Sri Lankan state, on the advice of the Israelis, had over the years adopted the practice of punishing the entire population for guerrilla attacks and anti-state activities; a counter insurgency strategy known as 'collective punishment'. The objective was to break the will of the people. By clamping an economic embargo on the North, subjecting the Tamil people to immense suffering as an act of 'collective punishment' the Jayawardene government wrongly anticipated that the civilian population would turn against the LTTE guerrillas. Contrary to their expectations, the public anger turned against the

Sinhala state. During the first half of 1987, the state's forces continued with their military offensive operations. There was fierce resistance from the LTTE guerrillas. The offensive and defensive war by the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE forces intensified and escalated and the bloody armed conflict became the dominant feature in the Tamil homeland. We watched this mounting violence from Chennai and feared that Jayawardene was embarking on military operations with genocidal intentions. Violence and counter violence in early 1987 peaked on 26th May 1987 when the Sri Lankan government finally embarked on an all out military offensive. The Sinhala state chose the thoroughly inapt title 'Operation Liberation' to describe what amounted to a major offensive of an unprecedented scale to invade the Jaffna Peninsula.

The Sri Lankan state's total disregard for the Tamil population was reflected when it unleashed the full might of its combined forces in the densely populated Vadamarachchi area. Vadamarachchi was the home of Mr. Pirabakaran and many LTTE leaders. One of the main aims of the operation was to punish the Vadamarachchi population and to break their will to go on supporting the LTTE guerrillas. But the scale of the operation by the Sri Lankan forces was out of all proportion to the LTTE's military strength in the area at the time. News transmitted to us from the Peninsula indicated that several thousand troops had unleashed ferocious assaults, inflicting heavy civilian casualties and widespread destruction of property. Indiscriminate aerial bombardment with incendiary bombs and sustained artillery shelling on a small geographical area were deliberately intended to cause a heavy toll. The shelling of unprotected coastal villages by offshore naval gunboats was aimed at the civilian population. The searches, round ups and mass arrests of able bodied young Tamil men and their transfer to the various prisons in the Sinhala south after the occupation of Vadamarachchi by the Sri Lankan army, was a frightening development and further indication that the operation had targeted the civilian population. The disappearance of Tamil youth during military swoops and in various detention centres and prisons in the Sinhala south was well-documented by human rights organisations.

Having occupied Vadamarachchi, the Sri Lankan military forces turned towards the more densely populated area of the Jaffna Peninsula, Valigamam. The LTTE, for its part, infiltrated back into Vadamarachchi and stepped up its urban guerrilla tactics of harassing the occupying army, inflicting heavy casualties. In a major counter offensive on the aggressor, the LTTE for the first time inducted its suicide unit, the Black Tigers. In a devastating attack on the army's headquarters in Vadamarachchi, Captain Miller volunteered his life and became the first Black Tiger of the LTTE. Captain Miller, a resident of Karaveddy in Vadamarachchi, sped a lorry load of explosives into the Central College, Nelliady that housed the new headquarters of the Sri Lankan army. The explosion flattened the building, killing hundreds of troops in an operation that destabilised the army's military occupation of the area. It was July 5th 1987, a historic date in the LTTE's diary of combat.

Delhi watched with justifiable concern the unfolding of the Sri Lankan state's military campaign. The mounting scale of human rights violations against Tamil civilians by the Sri Lankan

military forces during 'Operation Liberation' coupled with the devastating effects of the economic embargo on the population, set off alarm bells in Delhi. The language Delhi used in its condemnation of Colombo's military operations in the Peninsula contained insinuations of attempted genocide by the Sri Lankan 'security forces'. Meanwhile, frustrated with Colombo's reluctance to respond to India's grave concern for the Tamil civilian casualties and bowing to mounting popular pressure from wide sections of the Indian public to intervene to put a halt to the carnage, Delhi, on June 2nd 1987 dispatched a flotilla of boats carrying humanitarian assistance to the besieged Tamils in Jaffna. The objective was to provide critically needed sustenance and relief to the people's distress caused by both the economic blockade and the military offensive operations. The Indian flotilla was, however, prevented from entering the territorial waters of Sri Lanka and unceremoniously sent back to India by a hostile and resolute Sri Lankan Navy. Humiliated by the Sri Lankan rebuttal of its humanitarian gesture to the Peninsula Tamils, India raised the diplomatic tension when it responded by deploying Indian Air Force fighter planes to escort an air drop of essential food items to the beleaguered people in Jaffna. The outraged Sinhala government accused India of flagrant violation of Sri Lanka's air space. This accusation of violation of Sri Lanka's sovereignty amidst counter allegations of genocide created high and intense politico-diplomatic acrimony between the two neighbouring states.

The Indo-Sri Lanka Accord

Kittu had joined us in Chennai during these turbulent times. After miraculously escaping an assassination attempt, he had come to Chennai for medical treatment for the amputated leg injury sustained during an attack on his life in Jaffna. In the meantime, press reports of an intensification of diplomatic activity between Sri Lanka and India indicated that moves were afoot for formulating a political solution to Sri Lanka's national conflict. It was obvious too, that the political proposals mooted were essentially between both Delhi and Colombo, with no serious consultation with the LTTE. Bala was not happy about this new political development, and skeptical as to how the two states could contemplate a formula for a political solution if they didn't carry the LTTE with them. Bypassing the LTTE in any serious discussions indicated that any agreement between Delhi and Colombo was going to be imposed on the LTTE and the Tamil people, transgressing their democratic right to discussion and debate of the issues affecting their nation. While we were concerned with this development, Bala was taken by the state police for consultations with the Chief Minister Tamil Nadu during which time he was informed that Mr. Pirabakaran and his delegation were being flown from Jaffna to India. Bala was asked to join up with them at Chennai airport and accompany them to Delhi for political discussions. Included in Mr. Pirabakaran's delegation was Yogi and the Jaffna political leader Thileepan. From Delhi, Bala informed me that a new set of proposals, embodied in an agreement called the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, were presented to them for approval. He said that in the LTTE's view the framework was unacceptable. Bala also told me that they were confined to their hotel room surrounded by 'Black Cat' commandos. Yogaratnam Yogi was

more blunt. He revealed that the delegation was being intimidated and they were under house arrest. He was quite agitated on the phone and intimated that I might not hear from Bala for some time as they were constrained from making external phone calls from their hotel. When they did return from Delhi a few days later, Bala was deeply reflective on the nature of the political discussions they had in Delhi and expressed his serious reservations on the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord to be signed by Jayawardene and Rajiv Gandhi. Bala admitted to me that the LTTE delegation was under severe strain in Delhi. They were held incommunicado, confined to their hotel rooms under tight security. They were given only a few hours to study the content of the Accord and give their endorsement. Mr. Dixit, the Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and the pivotal figure in the formulation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, threatened the LTTE delegates with serious action if they refused to endorse the Accord. Mr. Dixit told them bluntly that the Accord would be signed and implemented whether they accepted it or not. Mr. Pirabakaran and Bala were annoyed over this aggressive, brinkmanship diplomacy of Mr. Dixit. The LTTE leader had categorically told the Indian diplomat that neither the LTTE nor the Tamils of Eelam would accept the framework of the Accord, since it fell far short of the Tamils' political aspirations. The LTTE did not budge from their committed position though subjected to severe pressure, persuasion and intimidation. Finally, the Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, invited Mr. Pirabakaran and Bala to his residence. Bala and Pirabakaran clarified the LTTE's position on the Accord, explaining the limitations and inadequacies of the Provincial framework envisaged in the Accord. The North and East is a single, integrated, territorial homeland of the Tamil speaking people and to subject the question of territorial unity to a referendum as proposed in the Accord was unfair and unacceptable, they argued. Mr. Gandhi was told that the Tamils did not trust Jayawardene and that he would never recognise Tamil aspirations. It was also explained to the Indian leader that the demand for the disarmament of the Tamil resistance movement within seventy- two hours of the signing of the document as stipulated in the Accord before the implementation of the envisaged framework was a serious mistake. Though they could not accept its contents, Rajiv Gandhi urged them not to oppose the Accord and promised a predominate role for the LTTE in an interim Northeastern government. Bala told me that Mr. Pirabakaran was skeptical of Rajiv's pledge but they agreed to his proposals to avoid confronting the Indian government. Mr. Pirabakaran was not happy with the events that had transpired in Delhi. His cadres mobbed him when he came to our house in Chennai, anxious to learn what the contents of the Agreement between Colombo and Delhi meant for the struggle. Both Bala and Pirabakaran were furious with what they considered the bullying tactics and arrogance of the Indian officials. These sentiments dominated relationships with Indian officials during the entire period of the implementation of the Accord. Mr. Dixit, although viewed by many as a clever diplomat, was perceived by the LTTE leadership as arrogant and manipulative and not to be trusted. Indeed, considering the far reaching implications of the Accord for the Tamil people and the pre-eminent position held by the LTTE in the Tamil struggle, it is quite unbelievable just how shabbily the LTTE leaders were treated in Delhi without being offered adequate time and space for a proper discussion of the Accord. Crucial to an understanding of this entire historic event is the fact that the LTTE was never a signatory to the Accord and was more or less excluded from its formulation. Ultimately India was to pay a heavy price both politically and

militarily for its arrogant attitude towards the LTTE representatives and their struggle.

The Indo-Sri Lanka Accord was signed amidst a great deal of controversy on both sides of the ethnic divide. The Sinhala south witnessed an outburst of anti-Indian sentiments with demonstrations and protests at what they considered Indian intervention in the internal affairs of the island. In the beginning the Tamils in the North and East, who had historically viewed India as an ally and potential savior, anticipated a period of security and peace with the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force to monitor the ceasefire between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military forces, and generously garlanded the troops when they entered the Jaffna Peninsula after landing at Pallaly Airport on July 30th 1987. Within three months of the arrival of the Indian Peace Keeping Force, we were to witness a complete about turn in the attitudes of both communities. The Tamils in the Northeast were hostile and resentful of the occupying Indian troops, while some sections of the Sinhalese were happy that the Indian troops were fighting their war with the LTTE. Furthermore, the LTTE was totally unaware that apart from enforcing the cease-fire between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military forces the Indian Peace Keeping Force had been considered by Delhi as a means to secure the forceful de-commissioning of LTTE arms if it failed to comply with the Accord. The only course for suspicion was the heavy military equipment being unloaded by the Indians at Pallaly airbase. One wondered how tanks and heavy artillery pieces could be compatible with the role of 'peacekeeping'.

Mr. Pirabakaran followed up the arrival of Indian troops in Jaffna with an address to his people on 4th August. A massive crowd thronged to a public meeting at Suthumalai in Jaffna to hear him deliver his famous 'I love India' speech where he set out his position regarding the Accord and the handing over of LTTE weapons to the Indian Peace Keeping Force. Acknowledging that his options were constrained by the political and military might of India, he nevertheless refused to give up his struggle for a separate Tamil state. This carefully crafted historic speech however, had to take into account the aspirations of the Tamil people as well as recognise the delicate balance between India's strategic influence and the Tamil struggle for self-determination. As events unfolded this proved to be the reality. From the outset the implementation of the Accord was haphazard and reflected the concerns of both Sri Lanka and India more than those of the aggrieved Tamil people. For example, the military commanders of the IPKF and the Sri Lankan officials were swift in ensuring the obligations of the Accord which required the laying down of the LTTE's weapons, but deliberately delayed the implementation of the interim administration as pledged by Rajiv Gandhi. This generated justifiable suspicion within the LTTE's ranks and within the Tamil population. Having surrendered a substantial section of their armoury and suspended all armed operations against the Sri Lankan state, the LTTE leaders and cadres looked upon the government of India to institute an interim administrative structure in the Northeast. To their dismay, the Indians kept quiet while the Sri Lankan President Jayawardene intensified Sinhala colonisation schemes in Tamil areas and opened up new police stations in the East.

Thileepan's Fast-Unto-Death

Thileepan, the young Tiger leader of Jaffna, took the podium on the 14th September at the Nallur Kandasamy temple, to commence his fast- unto-death as a protest against India's failure to fulfil her pledges, and to mobilise the frustrated sentiments of the Tamils into a national mass upsurge. Thileepan's non-violent struggle was unique and extraordinary for its commitment. Although an armed guerrilla fighter, he chose the spiritual mode of 'ahimsa' as enunciated by the great Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi to impress upon India the plight and predicament of the people of Tamil Eelam. The levels to which the Tamil people or more specifically, the LTTE cadres, are prepared to go for their freedom mirrors not only a deep passion for their liberation, but indicates the phenomenal degree of oppression they have been subjected to. It is only those who experience intolerable oppression of such a magnitude, of being threatened with extinction, that are capable of supreme forms of self sacrifice as we have seen from Thileepan's episode.

Thileepan, who had travelled to Delhi as part of Mr. Pirabakaran's delegation before the signing of the Accord, was informed of the content of the dialogue that had taken place between the Indian Prime Minister and the LTTE leader. With the knowledge that there was an unwritten agreement between Rajiv Gandhi and Pirabakaran and that it had not been implemented, he felt that his people and the struggle had been betrayed and decided on a fast-unto-death demanding the fulfillment of the pledges. When news of Thileepan's fast-unto-death and the deteriorating political situation between the LTTE and the Indian Peace Keeping Force reached us, we decided to leave India for Jaffna.

Following the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord the Indian authorities ran a few shuttle flights from Chennai to facilitate the return of some exiled Eelam Tamils in India to their homes in the Northeast of Sri Lanka. I had no wish to avail myself of this opportunity. Over the years many of the cadres who had visited us in Chennai had rendered stories of the difficulties and dangers they had overcome when crossing the Palk Strait waters to come and go from Jaffna and I could see no reason why we should be excluded from such risks. To our very good fortune the climate and sea conditions were perfect when we made our journey across the temperamental Palk Strait waters to Jaffna under a star-filled sky on mirror smooth water. The short trip turned out to be more of a pleasure cruise than an encounter with danger. When we landed on the white sand shores of Valvetitturai under the cover of darkness after the brief crossing of the Palk Strait in September 1987, one of my longstanding aspirations had been realised. But my joy at reaching the shores of Tamil Eelam after so many years of support for the struggle was contained by the gloom that hung in the air. Thileepan was a few days into his fast till death and the population of the Peninsula was seriously concerned and wholeheartedly behind the non-violent campaign of a single individual seeking justice from the world's largest democracy. Subsequently, our first priority after our arrival in the Peninsula was to visit Thileepan encamped at the historic Nallur Kandasamy temple, the cultural and spiritual centre of the Jaffna Tamils.

Thileepan's decision to single-handedly take on the credibility of the Indian state was not incongruous with his history of resistance to state oppression as a cadre in the LTTE. He had faced battle on several occasions in defence of Jaffna during Kittu's time and suffered serious abdominal wounds in the process. He was well known for his astute understanding of the politics and mindset of his people and emerged as a radical political leader. The senior LTTE women cadres often speak of his staunch advocacy of inducting women into the national struggle and is remembered as one of the founding fathers in the promotion of women's issues. With such a history it comes as no surprise that he endeared himself not only to the cadres but the people of Jaffna also. Bala met Thileepan during the pre-Accord talks when he shared a hotel room with him in Delhi and quickly grew very fond of this affable fellow. It was an extremely painful and emotional experience for Bala to meet him again in Jaffna, in totally adverse conditions, with Thileepan's life slowly ebbing away.

As we entered the premises of the Nallur Kandasamy temple we were confronted by a sea of people seated on the white sands under the blazing sun. The air was thick with collective emotion and solemnity. This fading young man on the platform obviously embodied the political sentiments and aspirations of his people. But it was more than that also. Thileepan's fast had touched the spirit of the Tamil nation and mobilised the popular masses in unprecedented solidarity. One could sense how this extraordinary sacrifice of a fragile young man had suddenly assumed a formidable force as the collective strength of his people. Thileepan's fast was a supreme act of transcendence of individuality for a collective cause. Literally, it was an act of self-crucifixion, a noble act by which this brave young man condemned himself to death so that others could live in freedom and dignity. With deep humility, Bala and I mounted the platform to speak to the reposed Thileepan. Already several days without food or water and with a dry cracked mouth, Thileepan could only whisper. Bala leaned closer to the weakened Thileepan and exchanged words with him. Naturally enough, Thileepan enquired about the political developments. We left soon afterwards, never to see him alive again.

As Thileepan's fast moved on in days, he was no longer able to address the public from the podium and spent much of his time lying quietly as his condition steadily deteriorated. As Thileepan grew visibly weaker in front of his people's eyes, their anger and resentment towards India and the IPKF grew stronger. The sight of this popular young man being allowed to die in such an agonising manner generated disbelief at the depth of callousness of the Indian government and the Indian Peace Keeping Force. All that was required to save Thileepan's waning life was for the Indian High Commissioner, Mr. Dixit, to humble himself and meet and reassure Thileepan that the Indian government would fulfil its pledges to the Tamils. In fact Delhi ignored Thileepan's fast in the early stages as an isolated idiosyncrasy of an individual, but later became seriously concerned when the episode gathered momentum and turned into a national uprising with anti-Indian sentiments. Delhi's concerns compelled Mr. Dixit to pay a visit to Jaffna to 'study the situation'. On the 22nd September, the eighth day of Thileepan's fast, Mr. Dixit arrived at the Pallaly airport where Mr. Pirabakaran and Bala met him. Bala told me later that Mr. Dixit was rude and resentful and condemned Thileepan's fasting campaign as a provocative act by the LTTE aimed at instigating the Tamil masses against the Indian government. Mr. Pirabakaran showed remarkable patience and pleaded with the

Indian diplomat to pay a visit to Nallur and talk to the dying young man to give up his fast by assuring him that India would fulfil its pledges. Displaying his typical arrogance and intransigence, Mr. Dixit rejected the LTTE leader's plea, arguing that it was not within the mandate of his visit. Had Mr. Dixit correctly read the situation and genuinely cared for the sentiments of the Tamil people at this very crucial time, it is highly probable that the entire episode of India's direct intervention in the ethnic conflict would have taken a different turn. But Thileepan's willingness to sacrifice his life in such a way touched the spirit of the people and his unnecessary tragic death on 26th September planted deeply the seeds of disenchantment with the Indian Peace Keeping Force. Events to follow only reinforced their shattered confidence in the Indian 'peacekeepers' and Delhi.

I remained in Valvettiturai after Thileepan's death. I felt comfortable and secure in this quiet coastal fishing village. Languishing under the burning tropical heat, Valvettiturai harbours a unique community of proud people with extraordinary courage and a record of militancy and resistance to oppression which would fill the pages of a history book. And it was in this ancient and historical town I paid my final respects to this remarkable freedom fighter, Thileepan. Small candle-lit shrines housing Thileepan's picture were set-up in front of every house in the village, as they were throughout the Peninsula. Plaited dry coconut leaves the traditional Tamil decoration indicating mourning strung from post to post, fringed roadsides. Funeral music blared from the loudspeakers of temples and schools. Thileepan's ravaged body was dressed in full military uniform and draped in the insignia of the LTTE. The garland bedecked funeral cortege had moved slowly from village to village throughout the Peninsula where crowds flocked to pay their profound respect to this legendary martyr. The sombre beat of military drums heralded the movement of the cortege from its resting-place in Valvettiturai through the village to its next destination. As Thileepan's open cortege crept through the main village road for the last time, I stood silently with the crowd lining the street, to pay a final salute to a young man whose fast and sacrifice had surpassed that of the guru of satyagraha, Mahatma Gandhi himself. Thileepan transcended Gandhi in his act of self-denial by refusing not only food but fluids also.

Tragedy Befalls Senior Commanders

One of the famous residents of Valvettiturai was Kumarappa, a senior LTTE cadre and commander of Jaffna. He lived there with his extended family. Kumarappa was an old friend of ours from the late 70s in the Chennai days. In the early 80s he went to Ireland to study marine engineering and he visited us regularly in London. When the 1983 anti-Tamil riots erupted he gave up his studies and followed us to Chennai from where he proceeded onto Jaffna to take up the struggle again. From Jaffna he was sent to Batticaloa. It was there he met and fell in love with his wife, Ranjini. In the more optimistic days following the immediate signing of the Accord, Ranjini came to Valvettiturai for her wedding to Kumarappa. When Bala made a political visit to Jaffna from Chennai, Kumarappa seized the opportunity and requested him to be the chief witness at his wedding. I was in Chennai on the occasion of the

wedding and hadn't met Ranjini. But one of the first things Kumarappa did when I arrived in Valvettiturai was to arrange for me to meet his new wife. I was truly delighted when he brought his bride to our house to meet me. For inexplicable reasons, the simple occasion of meeting Ranjini remains clear and strong in my memory. Perhaps it was the way the silvery moonlight lit up Kumarappa's face revealing for a fleeting moment the beauty we see in a youthful face when it is filled with happiness, or perhaps it was their affection for each other discernible in Ranjini's shyness. But the night was full of stars and it was warm and peaceful. Kumarappa and Rajini sat on a two-seater settee. He had his arm around her shoulders and I can still see the bridegroom beaming as looked at his bride. But Kumarappa's responsibilities as Jaffna commander allowed little time for him to spend with his new wife. Bala regularly travelled with Kumarappa to and from Jaffna city. I often visited Ranjini at the family home during Kumarappa's absence. Everything seemed so normal and pleasant. Who could have anticipated that a tragedy would befall them and snatch away his life and break Ranjini's heart?

I went to visit Ranjini around 5.30p.m. We were to go for an idyllic evening stroll on the beach. Kumarappa was at the house and said he had to leave at around 6p.m. On his insistence Ranjini and I went for a short walk while he prepared to depart. We returned quickly from our walk and, since they were a young, newly married couple, I discreetly left. On my way home from visiting Ranjini I saw the Trincomalee commander, Pulendran, speeding down the main street on a big motorbike. He was obviously enjoying the power of his bike and the wind on his face. I had no idea that he was heading in the same direction as Kumarappa and was just a few minutes away from meeting him. As I turned my bicycle into a lane he saw me, and a broad white smile lit up his open face and he waved as rode on down the road. Pulendran had also married just a few weeks before Kumarappa. Once again, Bala had been instrumental in getting the couple married. We attended Pulendran's marriage to Suba at the Murugan temple, Thiruporur in Tamil Nadu, the same location as Mr. Pirabakaran's wedding a few years earlier.

The following day, Bala informed me that the Sri Lanka Navy had intercepted Kumarappa and Pulendran and fifteen other senior LTTE cadres at sea near the coastal waters of Point Pedro. They were being held at the Pallaly military base under the custody of the Sri Lankan and Indian military personnel. I was surprised and disturbed, but not seriously agitated. I thought that it was a minor incident and they would be released. The situation in Jaffna was calm and stable. There was a cease-fire. The IPKF was maintaining peace and the Sri Lankan troops were confined to barracks. Furthermore, the LTTE fighters were granted general amnesty following their surrender of weapons to India as required by the obligations of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. The objective conditions that prevailed at that time were such that no one anticipated any serious turn of events following the arrest. As senior LTTE commanders, Kumarappa and Pulendran were well known to IPKF officials so we were confident that the Indians would ensure that no harm should be done to them. We assumed their release would be just a matter of clarifying with the Indian officials the confusion over their arrest. Indeed, that was the message Bala conveyed through me to Kumarappa's anxious young bride. But Bala's mood was tense and grave when he returned home the following day after visiting them in

custody at Pallaly base. He was troubled by the manner they were kept in custody as criminals surrounded by grim looking Sinhalese troops with levelled guns. Indian military officers and a small contingent of troops were stationed outside the building. The commander of the IPKF, Major General Harkirat Singh, told Bala that the Sri Lankan government had taken a hard-line position, demanding the LTTE cadres be dispatched to Colombo for interrogation. Bala became alarmed at the new turn of events. He immediately contacted Mr. Dixit, the Indian High Commissioner and urged him to use his diplomatic good offices to secure the release of the LTTE men. He also warned Mr. Dixit of grave consequences if any harm came to our cadres, some of who were senior commanders and war heroes. Mr. Dixit assured Bala he would do his best to secure their release.

The Jayawardene government, or more specifically, the hawkish National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali, demanded the arrested cadres be brought to Colombo for interrogation for alleged 'crimes' committed in the past, prior to the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. Kumarappa and Pulendran were senior commanders for Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts and successfully fought many battles and were highly regarded by the Tamils in the Eastern Province as war heroes. Athulathmudali, who had been hunting these famous guerrilla leaders for years without success, struck luck when these commanders were arrested and held in the custody of his soldiers. We were fully conscious of the grave danger posed to their lives should they be sent to Colombo for interrogation by the notorious intelligence agents under Athulathmudali, who was fiercely determined to exact revenge. The word 'interrogation' had a different meaning in the lexicon of the Sri Lankan police system - torture, and, in the case of LTTE suspected persons, summary execution. In view of the ugly history of gross violations of human rights of detainees by the Sri Lankan police and military authorities there was little doubt that our cadres in custody would be subjected to torture and extra judicial killing. Bala, with the permission of the IPKF, visited Kumarappa, Pulendran and the other cadres, most of whom were known to us, and conveyed to them the unexpected dramatic turn in their circumstances. They were shocked and agitated. They knew that they had to face a most painful death if they were taken to Colombo for 'interrogation'. They discussed their fate among themselves and made a unanimous decision. They conveyed their wishes to their leader Mr. Pirabakaran in letters addressed to him. Bala briefed Mr. Pirabakaran of these tragic and critical developments and handed over the letters. The letters informed the LTTE leader of a unanimous and secret decision by the cadres that they would, in LTTE tradition, prefer to take their lives rather than be handed over to the Sinhala state and subjected to barbarous torture and possibly death under the cover of interrogation. They wanted to die a honourable death, their letters insisted, rather than conceding to the demands of the Sinhala racist state that would discredit and undermine their long and determined history of resistance against their enemy. They demanded cyanide capsules.

Mr. Pirabakaran was deeply agitated and profoundly disturbed over the devastating turn of events. He felt the IPKF was in-charge of maintaining peace in the Tamil areas and that it was the duty and responsibility of the Indian military establishment to secure the release of his cadres who were pardoned under general amnesty. He requested Bala to exert maximum pressure on Mr. Dixit to secure their release. The next morning Bala rushed to Pallaly air

base to contact Mr. Dixit in Colombo. Confronted with the possibility of another calamity on a worse scale and magnitude than the Thileepan episode, Bala implored, threatened and argued with the Indian diplomat to secure the safe release of the LTTE cadres if another major crisis in Indo-LTTE relations was to be avoided. Bala was able to convince Mr. Dixit that far-reaching consequences might explode and shatter the peace in the Tamil homeland if the Indian government failed to get the release of the LTTE men. Mr. Dixit, Bala told me on his return home in the evening, was tense and anxious and his frantic efforts to persuade Jayawardene not to proceed with this dangerous and drastic step were unsuccessful. Complicating the crisis was the unfriendly and strained relationship between Mr. Dixit and the IPFK commander, who flatly refused to take orders from the Indian diplomat. Time was running out. Mr. Dixit failed to fully appraise the higher authorities in Delhi's corridors of power of the explosive turn of events and deluded himself that he could influence the cunning 'old fox' who was fully supportive of the devious scheme of his war Minister. We were to learn two years later from the Sri Lankan President Mr. Premadasa during the negotiating period with the Colombo government, that Lalith Athulathmudali was primarily responsible for the hard-line attitude of Jayawardene. Mr. Premadasa told us in detail how the Minister of National Security, with single-minded determination, manipulated Jayawardene and even threatened to resign his portfolio if his demand to have the LTTE cadres brought to Colombo was not met. Finally Jayawardene yielded to Lalith's threat and refused to consider the pleas of the Indian High Commissioner. Mr. Dixit told Bala that his efforts with the Colombo Government to secure the freedom of the LTTE fighters were a fiasco and that they would be flown to Colombo on the 5th October in the evening.

Mr. Pirabakaran was furious when he was informed of the final decision. He felt he was obliged to fulfil the last wishes of his cadres in custody. Mr. Pirabakaran and his commanders each took off his cyanide capsule and hung it around both Bala and Mathaya's necks with instructions to deliver it to the captured cadres. Garlanded with cyanide capsules Bala and Mathaya reluctantly and hesitantly visited the cadres on the decisive day of their transfer. Kumarappa sent instructions to his wife. Pulendran did the same. Haran, a married man with two small children, expressed his wishes for their future. And so the destiny of the LTTE cadres was sealed. A few minutes before the appointed flight to Colombo, Kumarappa, Pulendran and the other fifteen comrades simultaneously bit into the cyanide capsules. When the Sri Lankan troops surrounding the LTTE prisoners realised the catastrophe that was going on before their eyes, they pounced on them, in a rage, and started beating the LTTE cadres with their rifle butts, in a frantic attempt to obstruct the collective suicide. But it was all over. Twelve cadres, including Kumarappa and Pulendran died on the spot. Five cadres survived the ordeal and recovered in hospital.

It was evening on the 5th October when news of the collective suicide of the LTTE cadres was informed to the public and me. From the LTTE base in Valvettiturai the news was relayed by our walkie talkie set and the names were read out, slowly and deliberately: Kumarappa, gone; Pulendie Amman, gone, and then one name after the other until the list of this tragedy had been well spelled out. I sat there numbed, not believing my ears. How could this happen? It can't really be true. What has happened? And then from the distance a faint sound of wailing.

Kumarappa's wife, a quarter of a mile from our house, had been informed. And from another direction that distinguishable howl of unbearable emotional pain and grief: another family had been informed, and then another and another, until the village was an open, outdoor funeral parlour.

It is customary in the Tamil community for people to visit the homes and pay their respects to the deceased and offer condolences to the bereaved families, particularly in a small village such as Valvettiturai where most people know each other. In a situation where the martyred cadres had become national heroes, everybody wanted to salute their courage and pay the respects to the families, to share their grief with them. Subsequently, the next evening, together with a Sinhalese lady friend, Vaneetha - wife of a senior LTTE cadre, Mr. Nadesan - living in Valvettiturai, we visited all the families of the martyred cadres. The village people also went from house to house, gathering and discussing this unreal situation. Disbelief and grief were the two dominant emotions. Men huddled together and whispered while the women relatives and friends sat together on the floor, wailing and banging on their chests in demonstrations of collective grief.

I waited till Bala returned home before I went to see Ranjini, Kumarappa's young bride, the next morning. I dreaded it. How were we going to face this young woman. What could we say? My stomach churned as we dressed and readied to leave for her house. My light coloured sari signified I was in mourning.

Bala and I walked the short distance through the grief stricken and shaken village to Kumarappa's home where Ranjini was living with his family. As we came closer to the house we became part of a big crowd heading in the same direction. The sound of wailing grew louder as we neared the residence. When we entered the jam-packed lane leading to the front gate of Kumarappa's house, the crowd separated allowing us to pass unobstructed. Ranjini was distraught, delirious with grief not knowing where or how to contain her agonising distress. A few yards from the gate she caught sight of us and lunged at me, embracing me and pushing me back against the fence and wailing in utter agony. "Auntie, Auntie", she screamed, "My husband, my husband," she sobbed uncontrollably on my shoulder. I took her inside where the house was packed with countless women relatives sitting on the floor, there to provide support and share in Ranjini and Kumarappa's family's grief.

Ranjini's emotional torment continued throughout the night. As I tried to sleep, my emotions were kept awake by the pleading sound of Ranjini calling "Aththan, Aththan, Aththan" drifting through the silence of the night. (In Tamil culture a woman does not use the familiar first name to address her husband but adopts the respectable term 'Aththan' to address him.)

But the sharing of grief at Ranjini's house was not the end of the funeral process. The main funeral service was to take place the following evening. It was to be a mass, public funeral at the village sports ground. How was I going to cope with the emotion of such an event? But I, like everyone else, had to. In the meantime, as arrangements were being made for a national farewell to the martyred LTTE cadres, the recovered bodies were sent home for the last night.

Crowds thronged to the Valvettiturai grounds for a final homage to the twelve fallen heroes. The atmosphere was sombre as people filed past the lined up open coffins, many halting to weep at the foot of a cadre particularly known to them. Ranjini and Suba (Palendran's wife) were hysterical and constrained by their relatives. Kuha, wife of Haran, and her two children were also in the crowd of bereaved relatives supported by family and friends. Sobbing and wailing came from every direction. Eulogies in the form of poems, songs and speeches blared out over the loudspeaker. Ironically, one of the main LTTE speakers delivering a eulogy, Santhosam, was to die a few weeks later in battle with the Indian army. A downhearted and dispirited Mr. Pirabakaran and the LTTE leadership filed past slowly, occasionally pausing for reflection at the foot of the coffins of some of the most loyal, trustworthy and senior LTTE cadres who had followed him over the years.

Soon after Mr Pirabakaran's departure, Ranjini, Suba and Kuha, in Tamil tradition, were taken away from the funeral scene prior to the cremation. Ranjini had to be held and guided away as she struggled to cling to the coffin that was moving in the opposite direction to her. "Aththan, Aththan," she screamed to ears that could no longer hear her desperation. Suba had to be constrained as she struggled to rush to hold on to Pulendran's coffin as it was taken away out of her sight forever. The coffins were carried, in single, dignified file, to the waiting funeral pyres. Dressed in the Tamil tradition of white verti and bare-chested, ageing fathers stood silently and bewildered at the head of the coffins of their sons. Burning torches were handed to them, and, as the military salute rang out through the air, they stepped forward, in unison, and plunged the fire into the pyre, setting in motion the final extinction of their progeny. A swell of thick grey smoke billowing into the sky prompted the people to spontaneously stand and a groan emanated from the large, grief stricken crowd. It all seemed like a nightmare. How did it come to this? Why were so many people being emotionally tortured in this way? What had the people done to deserve such a loss and pain? Indeed, it was a major paradox that the people had been exposed to such emotional stress and the struggle had been subjected to such strain when a cease-fire was supposed to be in effect. That this calamity could follow so soon after the sacrifice of Thileepan added to the people's bewilderment. The Indian Peace Keeping Force and Delhi were totally discredited in the eyes of the public. The distrust of Colombo only deepened. Wounds were inflicted which, I believe, will never fully heal.

I left the scene of the funeral emotionally drained. I was unable to relate the happy bridegrooms I had known just a few days earlier and the huge, fresh smile from Pulendran and Kumarappa with the lifeless bodies in the coffins and the scene I had just witnessed. I also knew the other cadres from Chennai and Valvettiturai and I felt a huge sense of loss and sorrow. I learnt a sad and bitter lesson on the vicissitudes and fragility of life.

The events over the past few days had more or less set the political situation on an irreversible downward spiral. The relationship between the LTTE and the IPKF was never the same again, and never would be. The communal clashes and the reprisal killings of innocent Sinhalese were unfortunate outbursts of national grief. The climate was extremely explosive. There was mounting tension between the LTTE and the IPKF. There were several instances of violence in Jaffna. The population, angered by the tragic event, openly defied the Indian troops. In

the meantime, the Jayawardene Government blamed the LTTE for the killing of Sinhalese civilians and demanded India to take military action against the Tamil Tigers. The Indian Chief of the Army Staff, General Sundaraji and the Indian Defence Minister Mr. K.C. Pant flew to Colombo and held secret meetings with President Jayawardene. Colombo was told of the Indian decision to launch military offensive operations and disarm the LTTE. Jayawardene was delighted that his strategy had finally worked. i.e. to turn the guns of the Indian army against the Tamil Tiger guerrillas, whom the former had trained, armed and sustained. It was a diplomatic victory for Jayawardene but it spelled doom for the Tamils. 10th October was the date set for the Indian military invasion of Jaffna to disarm the LTTE by force. To keep the Tamil public in the dark concerning their military manoeuvres and to suppress local and international criticism of possible military excesses and atrocities of war, the Indian army launched a sudden and swift operation against the free media in Jaffna in the early hours of the morning on the 10th October, just a few hours before the major military onslaught. The printing presses of 'Elamurasu' and 'Murasoli' were blasted with explosives and the journalists arrested. Radio and television stations were attacked and all transmission facilities rendered ineffective. The world's largest democracy carried out the heinous crime of striking down the very instrument of democracy, the media of the people of Jaffna, to stifle their freedom of opinion and expression. Armed LTTE units fiercely resisted the Indian troops on the morning of the 10th October when they tried to march into the city from the famous Dutch Fort in Jaffna. The Indo-LTTE war broke out in full swing plunging the Tamil nation into a new and unprecedented cycle of violence, death and destruction.

'Operation Pawan'

In its considerations prior to the deployment of Indian troops as a Peace Keeping Force in the Northeast of Sri Lanka under the terms of the Indo Sri Lanka Accord, the Indian military hierarchy's assessment of seventy-two hours as the time frame required to forcefully disarm the LTTE if conditions demanded, proved to be a gross military miscalculation and underestimation of the LTTE's fire power, tactics and determination. Subsequently, when the hostilities exploded on Jaffna soil on 10th October 1987, the Indian army assumed their task would be confined to a quick mop up of a small guerrilla outfit. Code-named 'Operation Pawan', the initial thrust of the forceful disarming of LTTE cadres by the Indian troops was aimed at cutting off the head of the organisation by capturing the LTTE leadership. With the head gone, the Indians felt, the LTTE cadres would be disorganised, de-moralised and would eventually surrender without resistance. But from the outset of their campaign the Indian military was confronted with an unexpected ferocity of LTTE resistance. With the objective of capturing Mr. Pirabakaran and his senior commanders, the Indians launched an airborne commando raid at Jaffna University on 12th October. They soon realised the disarming process was not going to be an easy task as they had expected. The operation turned out to be one of the major military debacles in the history of the Indian army.

Indian intelligence had acquired information that Mr. Pirabakaran's headquarters were situated in Pirambady Lane in Kokkuvil, a Jaffna suburb, and a short distance from the Jaffna University and the Faculty of Medicine. An open space between this complex of structures provided an ideal landing zone for an airborne operation and tempted the Indians into embarking on a rash and risky military venture. Mr Pirabakaran, with his keen instinct for military strategy and tactics, had already identified the field as the likely location for a major commando raid on his headquarters. In anticipation, he deployed his select group of cadres in the university buildings surrounding the field, and waited. As helicopters disgorged troops from the 13th Sikh Light Infantry and para commandos on the designated open ground in the early hours of the morning on the 12th October, they were met with ferocious and pitiless fire from waiting LTTE machine guns. As serious for the troops was the damage to Indian helicopters by the machine guns, which effectively ruled out further landings of troops to strengthen and support their colleagues, caught in the LTTE's fusillade. The Indian jawans, surrounded and isolated, fought for their lives till midmorning on 12th October when their last bullet had been fired. In a final bid for survival, the troops launched a desperate bayonet charge. Only one Indian soldier survived to tell the story of this abortive operation. Twenty-nine specially trained Sikh commandos perished in this battle. In the meantime, the para commandos, in single-minded pursuit of their military objective of eliminating Mr. Pirabakaran, had separated from the Sikh platoon and pressed on in the direction of their target. They discovered on their arrival at his headquarters, that Mr. Pirabakaran had slipped out just a few hours before the Indian operation had got underway. But this overconfident, ill-judged military venture set the scene for one of the worst records of atrocities against Tamil civilians by the Indian army during its disarming campaign of the LTTE. Beleaguered and jumpy Indian para commandos stumbling around in unfamiliar territory in the dark for a target they had never seen, mercilessly shot and killed any Tamil civilian in the vicinity of this futile military operation. Mortar and artillery support for the stranded paras added to the civilian toll. A contingent of tanks deployed from the nearby Jaffna Dutch Fort to rescue and back up the desperate and isolated para commandos, mowed people down like blades of grass further adding to the list of civilian casualties. Crushed and mangled bodies and bullet riddled corpses littered the area after the Indian troops had moved on from the carnage they had unnecessarily caused. In total, forty Tamil civilians lay dead and dozens were injured as a result of this military misadventure.

As 'Operation Pawan' proceeded and intensified, artillery shells continued to rain down on densely populated areas in the Valigamam sector of the Peninsula, blasting property to rubble, blowing people apart and permanently maiming others. The wanton butchery of Tamil civilians by Indian troops went hand in hand with their multi-pronged advance along the main arteries of the Peninsula towards the Jaffna town. In their advance towards the Jaffna town, the jawans left a trail of grisly deaths and random killings of Tamil civilians by trigger-happy troops. Behaving like a foreign army of occupation the Indian troops exacted their booty. Countless numbers of Tamil women screamed in terror and disgust as the gangs of jawans from the invading Indian columns subjected them to brutal sexual violence; their cries of anguish echoed repeatedly in the air when the 'peacekeepers' violated what Tamil women consider most sacred their modesty, dignity and pride. Every house along the route of the invading

hordes was pillaged and plundered. Every household was robbed of cash, jewellery and other valuables. The invasion of Jaffna was a big booty for the Indian army but for the civilians of Jaffna, it was a shock, terror and humiliation. The mass disillusionment and resentment against the Indian 'peacekeeping' troops turned into a popular sympathy and support for the LTTE freedom fighters. Confronted with a major conventional military assault with the Indians deploying helicopter gunships, artillery and mortar fire, and tanks, the LTTE cadres drew on their territorial advantage and classic urban guerrilla tactics. Ultimately they were successful in slowing down the planned three day operation, to a two-week campaign. The war weary Tamil civilians, having suffered high casualties and massive destruction of their property at the hands of the Sri Lankan military forces, now found themselves in the midst of another military occupation of their land with an enemy of unsurpassed ferocity, the Trojan horse of 'peacekeeping'.

'Operation Pawan', ostensibly launched to disarm the LTTE, not only murdered and maimed inexcusable numbers of civilians during its intensity in the early days, but plunged large sections of the population into either temporary or permanent displacement. Jaffna residents fled to designated refugee camps while others sought refuge outside the main theatre of war. Those who stayed behind risked death and injury at the hands of the unpredictable and aggressive Indian troops. In this hostile situation it became imperative to evacuate wounded LTTE cadres from the Jaffna General Hospital to local hospitals in the Vadamarachchi and Chavakachcheri districts of the Peninsula. Small and poorly equipped, local hospitals struggled to cope with LTTE casualties and a rising toll of critically injured civilians. Many of the displaced people came to stay with relatives and friends in Valvettiturai in the Vadamarachchi sector. Some LTTE cadres returned home to Valvettiturai bringing their colleagues with them. And the Valvettiturai people responded to this national crisis, revealing their deep patriotism and great courage as many families secretly provided accommodation and refuge to wounded LTTE cadres. One of these people, Kittu's mother, affectionately known as 'Kittu Amma', a staunch and unbending advocate of Tamil Eelam and a trusted and reliable supporter of the LTTE, willingly opened her house and heart to the needs of the struggle. This remarkable matriarch, who had a long history of providing sustenance and support to LTTE cadres, was viewed as the safest house to accommodate the senior veteran Pottu Amman, critically injured in the LTTE ambush of Indian jawans at the Jaffna Medical Faculty. Pottu Amman was the first LTTE cadre to be injured in this campaign and was rushed to the Jaffna General Hospital where he was given emergency life saving surgery for a serious abdominal injury. Following his initial recovery from the surgery, he was moved to the safer quarters of Kittu Amma's house in Valvetitturai. Two other senior cadres joined Pottu Amman at Kittu Amma's house. But Pottu Amman had further injuries. Automatic rifle rounds had torn open the tricep muscles and the huge injury required constant care and thorough cleaning. He had a smaller injury to his leg and foot. He was, in other words, critically injured.

Notorious Massacres

When we came to know that Pottu Amman and other LTTE cadres were being accommodated at Kittu's house, just a few hundred yards from ours, we went to see how they were faring. We found the house converted into a makeshift hospital and the injured cadres resting on their beds. Kittu's mother was in charge. A woman in her sixties, Kittu Amma, with warm motherly affection, fussed and attended to these cadres, brightening their mood with her colourful language, vibrant sense of humour and wonderfully mischievous laugh, for twenty four hours of the day. Nearby relatives and neighbours backed her up, providing food and attending to shopping etc. My nursing skills meant that I was able to assist her and take some pressure of the LTTE medics team by taking on some responsibility for Pottu Amman's and the remaining cadres' medical care. Pottu Amman's abdominal wound healed well. But his arm wound was nasty. The dressing was huge and it oozed. Indeed, so extensive and painful was Pottu Amman's arm injury he required regular anaesthesia at the local hospital for thorough examination and cleaning of the wound. I accompanied the seriously injured, including Pottu Amman, to the Point Pedro Base Hospital (otherwise known as Manthikai hospital) for treatment.

At Manthikai Hospital in Vadamarachchi, the full scale of the war was apparent. Civilians with shrapnel wounds and injured cadres filled the wards. The resources of this local hospital were stretched to capacity. Assisting the local staff to cope with the medical and staff shortages at the hospital was a team of dedicated doctors and nurses from the Nobel Peace Laureates the international medical organisation *Medicins Sans Frontieres*. During a routine clinic visit with Pottu Amman, I observed a continuous flow of casualties, covered in blood, bleeding, and moaning in agony from horrendous wounds, arriving at the hospital. They had travelled ten miles from Chavakachcheri district to reach the Manthikai Hospital for emergency medical care. The distressed and shocked patients and their relatives told us there had been a major attack on civilians by the Indian 'peace keepers' at Chavakachcheri. It was the 27th October 1987, a day of shame in the history of the Indian army and a day of horror in the agonising history of the Tamil people. Indian helicopter gunships had flown to Chavakachcheri town and proceeded to continuously circle the local market. The market was filled with people leisurely shopping for their family's supplies. Chaos broke out when the helicopter gunships suddenly opened fire on the unsuspecting shoppers. Rockets spewed from the helicopters, exploding amongst the crowd, causing panic and chaos in the market. The terror stricken and horrified crowd scattered and took cover. Once these hovering death machines had left the scene, the breadth of the carnage was obvious. Dismembered bodies littered the area; the injured writhed in pain and shock, bleeding from their grievous and often fatal injuries. The people scrambled to find vehicles to transport the injured to hospital. Subsequently, the hospital was inundated with critically injured patients. I offered to help in this crisis at the hospital. The injured civilians had refused to go to the Jaffna General Hospital in the centre of the town, despite the availability of better medical care facilities. Fresh in the memories of the people was the knowledge of another brutal massacre at the Jaffna hospital just one week earlier on the 21st October. In this outburst of military barbarity, twenty-one serving doctors,

nurses, and labourers, and patients lying sick in their beds were massacred when Indian troops stormed into the hospital. All hell had broken loose when troops entered the hospital, spraying automatic gunfire and tossing grenades at patients and staff. Back up mortar fire shattered the wards, and choked the air with smoke and dust. Point blank gunfire and grenade explosions were how the Indian 'peacekeepers' responded to staff with raised hands as a gesture of peace and surrender. A further fifty-five hospital staff and patients were severely injured during this gross act of unprovoked barbarity by the Indian troops. It was not difficult therefore, to understand the apprehensions of the people about attending the Jaffna General Hospital.

Before we had time to prepare for a major medical emergency, the admitting centre and single operating theatre were full of injured civilians all requiring urgent surgery. Injured patients of all ages with their distressed relatives struggling for the medical care which might save the life of their loved ones, were packed into the operating area. A young woman with severe abdominal wounds was on the operating table having her torn bowel picked clean of shrapnel pieces and the multiple tears re-stitched. A relative pressed on the bleeding artery point in the leg of another patient while he waited for the doctors to attend to the injury. The thirty-year-old male patient I was caring for had a single hole in the chest and gashes in the abdomen. Fears that he had already developed peritonitis worried the doctors. The bleeding from his left thigh indicated serious injury below the gashes we could only slightly see. A blood stained bandage applied around his head as a first aid measure at the time of the injury hid the seriousness of a laceration to the skull. As I stood there wondering which direction running water was coming from, I felt something warm spilling onto my foot. I looked down to see blood running from the patient's head. Removal of the bandage revealed a long, inoperable head laceration. There was nothing anyone could do for this unfortunate man: the end was very near for him. His relatives, foreheads wrinkled with anxiety, peering through the window of the operating room, cried out in grief when they saw he was dead. In another corner of the waiting room, a group of anxious Muslim men hovered over the ripped apart body of a close relative hoping the doctors would be able to work the miracle of reattaching the torn away parts. To no avail. Death had won the day. In desperation, relatives brought the half torso of one of the members of their family. Limbs were amputated and filling the rubbish bins. The floor was sticky with spilled blood. And the air was thick with urgency and horror. Thirty Tamil civilians were murdered in Chavakachcheri by the Indian 'peacekeepers' that day and another seventy-five received devastating and maiming injuries.

Several hours and dozens of casualties later, when the repairing of broken and mangled bodies was over for the day and the patients returned to the ward to continue their struggle to survive, all that remained was the cleaning up of this surgical battle ground. I stood and looked at the over-used room. The white mosaic floor was streaked with rivulets of blood meandering through it. Over filled rubbish bags with dispossessed limbs poking out from them sent shivers down one's spine. Blood drenched swabs lying loosely in buckets told the story of desperate surgical intervention. Bowls of hand washing water were now a dusty pink. Used surgical gloves as lifeless as the limbs they helped to remove hung lamely on racks waiting to be revived for further use after cleaning. One could only be angry at the events of the evening. That the human mind could find the rational to justify such abominable atrocities on innocent people

seemed unconscionable. The indiscriminate nature of the victims compelled me to reflect on my own good fortune and fragile mortality. There was no reason for me to believe that I was in any way different from the casualties I had seen that day and would be shielded from such devastating events. Why should I be? On this occasion I was fortunate enough not to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. But as I watched the agony and suffering of these people I was compelled to reflect on the logic behind the nature of the forces at work which had singled out this particular community of people to face this tyrannical persecution and terror from foreign occupation. For me, the savage nature of oppression and the carnage the Tamil people were being subjected to had earned them the political right to determine their own destiny.

With Valigamam as its military epicentre, the Indian troops looked northwards towards Vadamarachchi and southwards in the direction of Chavakachcheri in Thenmarachchi region as the next theatre of the military campaign to disarm the LTTE. Chavakachcheri was the first to fall to the Indian troops. The indiscriminate murder of civilians, rape of Tamil women and the plunder of the Tamil people's property during search and destroy operations in that area were well documented.

The people of Chavakachcheri have a long and unique history of extraordinary courage and commitment during the years of the national struggle. It has been home to a large number of LTTE cadres and many martyrs. Subsequently, LTTE resistance, sustained and supported by the Chavakachcheri people, posed a threat to the Indian troops. Constantly re-grouping and organising, LTTE cadres launched sporadic urban guerrilla attacks. Indeed the success of the LTTE cadres in surviving the saturated Indian army occupation of Chavakachcheri demonstrated their courage and determination. The commander of the LTTE guerrillas in Chavakachcheri during this period of Indian military occupation. was Tamil Chelvan, the present head of the LTTE Political Section.

The increased aerial activity over the Vadamarachchi district, and the odd sighting of Indian foot patrols on reconnaissance exercises on the fringes of Vadamarachchi, were indications that the Indian military hierarchy had turned its focus onto this LTTE heartland. We could expect an intensification of its presence and operations in the area in the near future. So, when our recce cadres informed us that an Indian patrol could be seen moving slowly along the main Jaffna -Udupitty road, we knew our time had come: we would have to vacate our house and move further into the heartland of Vadamarachchi. This was the only option open to us. To the north of our land mass was a vast sea, the Palk Strait, a stretch of the Indian Ocean separating Southern India and Sri Lanka. The naval patrol of the northern seawaters by Sri Lankan and Indian warships effectively blocked deep-sea excursions for the time being. Besides, waiting at the end of the northern horizon was India, which was at war with us. A permanent guerrilla life deep in the Vanni jungles was also not a realistic choice for us. The first thing we had to consider was Bala's health. Had he been younger and in better health it would of course have been a possibility. And secondly, since we were both more on the political side of the organisation than the military, we could be more useful to the struggle either by working with the people in the society or with the international community rather than tucked away underground amid jungle guerrilla warfare. And of course, a major concern was access to a

regular insulin supply. There was no guarantee that we could secure a steady flow of insulin for Bala in the jungle areas. But those considerations apart, our overriding concern and aspiration was to live amongst the people, and we thought we could survive an underground existence in Vadamarachchi. Furthermore, in the early stages of the conflict, Bala harboured a hope that he would be called upon by Mr. Pirabakaran to negotiate a cease-fire with the Indian army, but the Indians were not interested in halting their military campaign. At this stage of the Indian military offensive, Mr. Pirabakaran, who was the main target of Operation Pawan, had evacuated the Peninsula and was deep in the jungles of the Vanni organising and executing both urban and jungle guerrilla warfare against the Indian occupation army.

5 Hunted By The Indian Army

Soosai, the veteran commander of the Sea Tigers, was in charge of Vadamarachchi at the time of the outbreak of hostilities. He was a frequent visitor to our house and assumed responsibility for our security in Vadamarachchi. It was Soosai who regularly informed Bala of the military developments in the Peninsula and every move of the encroaching Indians towards Vadamarachchi. They frequently discussed the military strength of the LTTE in Vadamarachchi sector and the mode of resistance to confront the Indian army. In view of the manpower and firepower limitations of the LTTE in the area, Bala believed it would be futile for our cadres to openly confront the advancing Indian columns in conventional warfare and risk incurring heavy losses. Given the brutal history of the Indian army's military advances into Valigamam and Chavakachcheri, a conventional mode of LTTE resistance, in our assessment, would have been met by a barrage of indiscriminate artillery fire on Vadamarachchi from Pallaly and Valvettiturai army camps to soften up LTTE defences before a major assault on the sector. Such an eventuality would certainly have led to intolerable civilian casualties. Confronted with such a military onslaught and heavy civilian casualties, the LTTE would have, at the end of the day, been compelled to withdraw from the district. We felt it was unnecessary to expose the people to such devastation when an alternative and sustainable military strategy could be adopted by the LTTE. Furthermore, to subject the people to such destruction of life and property following so soon after 'Operation Liberation' by the Sri Lankan forces - the military campaign which triggered the Indian intervention we felt, would be an intolerable agony for them. After deep reflection, Soosai accepted the rational of Bala's view and the area was spared the violence of artillery shelling. He and his cadres went on to sustain the resistance to the occupation as an underground urban guerrilla force throughout the duration of the Indian army presence in Vadamarachchi.

A section of the Indian army had been camped at the Sri Lankan army base on the edge of Valvettiturai since their arrival in the Jaffna Peninsula. But apart from a minor attempt by a scouting patrol of jawans at the outbreak of hostilities, there had been no major advance from that base to move into and occupy Valvettiturai. A guerrilla attack on the scouting jawans had sent them scurrying back to their post. Instead, when it did finally come, the army started its military advance into Vadamarachchi from a different direction: along the main Jaffna - Valvettiturai road.

With the Indian army literally knocking on the door, we decided it prudent to decamp and move to safer territory. Confronted with this life threatening scenario I looked at the possessions and luggage I was packing and realised that the objective circumstances I faced were incompatible with the burden of property. I could do nothing to change the situation I was in so I had to

choose the next best option. It was time to relinquish my things. I turned my attention to dispossessing myself of unnecessary property or rather, to choose the most essential items. A quick scan of the packed Hiace van and it was obvious the boxes of books would have to be the first to go. We had a wide collection of expensive textbooks and fiction that had been sent from London to India and we brought them to Jaffna with us. We were reluctant to part with this collection of knowledge which we had built over the years, but there was little room for sentimentality. They were the easiest items to dispose off, and the most convenient for people to store. But when we distributed the books, we had to ensure they went to educated families as boxes of English books in a household without a background of education would have exposed the residents to considerable danger from the suspicious Indians searching for clues to our whereabouts. Kitchen utensils were clumsy items, which we had to leave behind and I had no difficulty in disposing of them. Clothes were sorted in terms of priority. I allowed myself the small pleasure of choosing a few items of clothing I particularly liked. But most were chosen for their suitability in the circumstances. I packed our clothes into two bags, one for Bala and one for myself. There was no electricity supply in the area so torches and batteries were vital to our existence. I was prepared to carry the kerosene lamp we used in the home also. I tucked a few candles into the corner of the bag along with boxes of matches just in case they were required in emergency situations. Eventually, they did come in handy. The remaining stuff was shoved into suitcases and distributed to various houses. As a result of this 'clean up', four fifths of my life 'savings' were gone. I had one final attachment to let go of, my photograph album. My family album framing my childhood school photos, wedding photos etc and all that historically sentimental stuff, were covered in layers of plastic and a cadre took them to a plot of land. There, under the cover of darkness, he unceremoniously buried the photos to get rid of any trace of their hunted owner. I hoped that they would survive. Needless to say, they did not. When I returned to Vadamarachchi two years later the photos were exhumed from their damp grave and found to be in an advanced stage of decomposition. Fungus had penetrated the plastic and was disfiguring loved faces, memorable scenes and precious moments. I felt as if I had lost my past.

We thought that the safest arrangement for us would be to move away from the main roads and coastal areas into the heartland of Vadamarachchi. The peculiar network of narrow lanes which weave their way throughout Vadamarachchi gave us a geographical advantage and was a major factor taken into consideration in deciding where to relocate. This all sounded very logical and comfortable to Bala as not only did his family and friends live in this part of Vadamarachchi, but as a boy, he had spent many years happily playing in the area and had a first hand knowledge of the terrain. His old friends, houses, shops, schools he attended, the network of lanes, the smell of the area evoked a nostalgia in Bala as the danger we were in sent him catapulting back to his boyhood years.

Soon after we moved out of Valvettiturai, the Indian troops crept in, setting up sentry posts and check points at strategic locations and consolidated their positions. Then, stage by stage they expanded their presence until the occupation was complete and the jawans were controlling the town and main roads.

Moving into Karaveddy

Intervening in this crucial phase of our life was Sukla, a senior and experienced LTTE cadre, in charge of the political section in the Karaveddy sector, in the very heart of Vadamarachchi. This battle experienced local cadre with his detailed knowledge of the geography and people became a determining actor in our lives. Sukla found a house for us about four miles from Valvettiturai and he assumed responsibility for our security. This unusually modern house in Kaladdi, Karaveddy, was more than adequate for the accommodation of Pottu Amman and the other wounded cadres, who were also compelled by the encroaching presence of the Indian troops, to find a safe house. From here, Pottu Amman could, for the time being, continue to travel to the Manthikai hospital for the care of his wound. We were in fact a group made up of fluctuating numbers, as people came and went, united by the common danger we were in and our urgency for shelter and safety.

The Indian military penetration into the Vadamarachchi landmass was steady and systematic. The Indians had little or no idea of the geographical terrain and the extraordinary and unique web- like complexity of the lane network in the village areas is confusing to a newcomer. While this proved to be a disadvantage to the occupying troops, it gave the LTTE guerrillas a tactical advantage and also provided the villagers with ways to avoid the Indian troops. For the interlopers, time was required to learn to navigate their way around these long-trodden pathways. The confounded Indians therefore, confined their routine patrols to the main roads in their early days of their occupation. And this suited us perfectly. In the first instance, the injured cadres, in particular Pottu Amman, were given more time to recover. Secondly, Bala and I had space to study the situation and unfolding developments without having to be overly concerned with the whereabouts of the Indian army.

The former EROS leader, Bala Kumar, also a Vadamarachchi man, came to visit Bala at our new camp during this time. Bala Kumar was well known to Bala from the Indian days and he was sympathetic to the politics of the LTTE. Since his organisation was not in conflict with the Indian 'peacekeepers', he was conveniently located to convey messages from the Indian military leadership to the LTTE. Furthermore, as a patriot his sentiments were more with the LTTE than with the hostile Indians and he brought with him vital information on the thinking and movements of the Indian forces. One of his most interesting messages from the Indian commanders in Vadamarachchi was a proposal for a meeting between Bala and the Indian military high command. Bala, somewhat sceptical about the sincerity of such a meeting, yet nevertheless concerned that there might be an opening to end the war, conveyed this message to Mr. Pirabakaran. The ever-cautious Pirabakaran quite astutely viewed this offer as a ploy to capture Bala and advised him not to meet the Indian commanders. Mr. Pirabakaran was correct in his judgement. The Indians, using this deception, detained a senior LTTE cadre in Batticaloa. Fortunately, we did not take the bait. The capture of Bala would have constituted a major propaganda victory for the Indian campaign and we had no intention of feeding it. Their propaganda machine was fully mobilised. Colombo controlled the airwaves and collaborated with the Indians, constantly dishing out to the Tamil public, stories of fabulous

military successes and exaggerated figures of captured, killed or surrendered LTTE cadres. The 'news' reporting was an effective method of disinformation as an integral part of the war, aimed at demoralising both the Tamil public and the LTTE cadres. In this context we were determined not to provide a scoop to the Indian propaganda machine by allowing either Bala or Pottu Amman to be caught or killed. Neither Bala nor I intended to be taken alive by the Indian army.

The Indian army intensified its military occupation and tightened its grip over Vadamarachchi by stepping up its presence and establishing camps at strategic towns. Point Pedro, Nelliady, Polygandy, Udupitty, and Tunnalai were just a few towns where the main Indian military establishments functioned. Udupitty became one of many notorious detention and torture centres. Heavily armed jawans manned sentry posts at main street junctions and were dotted throughout the entire area. Hostile and jumpy troops at the many checkpoints all added to the high profile, threatening presence of the Indian 'peacekeepers'. With this steadily intensifying military saturation of Vadamarachchi, the security afforded to us by the geographical terrain became a less important factor in our survival. The Indian troops grew in confidence and boldness and began to extend their presence, stretching out into the depths of villages. To address their lack of first hand knowledge of the area they were obviously studying their maps. Singling out a geographical area, the jawans patrolled the lanes branching just off the main roads explored the new territory, learned the direction of paths and inched deeper into mainland Vadamarachchi every day. Confident of their new knowledge of a specific area the troops would swoop, cordon off an area, and conduct search and destroy operations. This was a dangerous development in the mode of Indian military operations and, according to our observation of troop movements, it became imperative for us to formulate contingency plans and set about finding alternative places to camp in emergency situations.

The people in the area constantly brought us new information on the troops' movements. Small children, running as fast as their skinny little legs could carry them, would often fly into our house to warn us of the unusual presence of jawans in the area, how many there were, how long they would be hanging around and in which direction they eventually departed. Other LTTE cadres living underground in Vadamarachchi and protected by their families and friends, often visited us and brought their store of intelligence reports. Based on the information gathered, we could follow the movement of the troops. But while there was always a spontaneous flow of information to us, there was also, equally, information going in the opposite direction to the Indians. In small, close-knit communities there is not much that remains hidden for very long, so we had no doubt that the open secret of our whereabouts had become known beyond the immediate perimeters. Our continual presence in Vadamarachchi was a talking point within the community and the Tamil regiments of the Indian troops could easily pick up innocent conversation from civilians.

Another serious development was the information from Bala Kumar that the Indians had come to know of Bala's and my presence in the Karaveddy area and that orders had been issued for our arrest. The hunt was on. Such news effected a mental shift in us. Our chances of being captured were no longer random. The Indians had made us a specific target. But most of the

troops had never seen Bala and had no idea of his identity. The easiest identifiable link to Balasingham was his white wife. Initially the troops raided houses where the occupant's name was Balasingham and a few innocent people were taken in for identification and subsequently released. They also adopted a strategy of directly enquiring from the public the whereabouts of a white woman in the area. Indeed, as the search intensified, we heard news of troops on house to house searches inquiring from the inhabitants, "Have you seen a white woman in the area?" Obviously my colour posed a danger to anyone who moved with us and as time went on and the hunt heated up, I started to resent, even hate, my white skin. But that is a different story. For the moment, the intensified cordon and search operations in the area and more frequent helicopter flights over our house were enough to warn us that the Indian army was moving closer to our camp. Our suspicions were more than justified when our camp came under fire from a helicopter.

From the onset of hostilities, the Indian air traffic over Vadamarachchi was intense. Helicopters were deployed by the Indian military for everything from the transporting of military materials to aerial attacks. They came and went through most of the day and less frequently at night. So, their incessant humming became part of the environment. That we should be alert when the distant humming of helicopters became a chugging, was also part of our life. Helicopters always gave away their distance and intentions by the degree of noise we could hear from them. But on this particular day, in the late afternoon, when the low flying helicopter flew into our area and slowly shifted its trajectory from a straight path over our house to a circular one around it, we immediately knew trouble was at hand. With this aggressive posture, the people, familiar with the potential danger of helicopters, braced themselves in anticipation of what was to come. Our cadres stopped what they were doing and ran helter-skelter to safety behind the most solid structures. The injured LTTE cadres were relatively safe in a small concrete walled room. Bala and I, outside in the garden when the helicopter came chugging along, ran for cover when we saw it slowly turning in the direction of our house. We took cover behind the solid concrete leg of the water tank tower in the compound. With our backs against the concrete pillar, we moved in a circular tandem with the airborne killing machine, keeping out of its sights. Automatic gunfire from the helicopter ripped through the air, spraying our residential area. Satisfied that they had either inflicted the casualties they aimed for, or terrorised us sufficiently, the big whirly bird set course for its base.

Relocating Houses

Amazingly none of our cadres or the people in our surrounding area were injured during this attack. Apart from the breaking of some tiles on the roof of our house and splintering of a few banana trees, most of the deadly rounds had buried themselves in the surrounding vegetable gardens. But we were all angry, cursing the Indian troops for this brazen, irresponsible assault on a residential area. This airborne raid confirmed our suspicions that it wouldn't be too long before the Indians moved deeper into our area on a search and destroy mission. We had no choice but to move on to safer territory. A consensus emerged that a smaller group stood

a far better chance of not being captured than the large group. It would also be easier to find safe houses. We decided to go in different directions. The injured cadres had made their arrangements in a safe house out of the area where the Indian army was not concentrating their search. Sukla had, during his daytime recce of the area, found another house for us to stay in. So we packed our few belongings and moved out. We trudged through the narrow lanes skirted by high wall fences to a house in Karaveddy; a sizeable brick house in a large compound with a big well at the back, and a cluster of coconut trees shading the place.

When we arrived at our safe house, we found an elderly lady shuffling around in her property. The house was empty and dark, except for a few immediate possessions of the lady. The house was dark not because of too much shade or because it was poorly built, but the consequence of an astrological configuration. The lady who owned the house was a practising Hindu and a believer in astrology. Before building it the family consulted the astrologer for advice on its layout. On his advice, the plans for the house were drawn, incorporating the auspicious direction of the kitchen and other rooms. As a result of these astrological calculations, rooms were plunged into eternal darkness while others were unbearably sunny and hot.

And it was not long after we had each found a room and 'settled' into the new safe house, the gracious elderly lady narrated her story; a story not untypical of so many elderly people in Vadamarachchi at that time. The slight stoop in her gait, her slightly ruffled, more grey than black, thinning bun and the loose draping of her cotton sari indicated that this lady was well advanced in years. The simplicity and light colour of the sari and the absence of 'thali' - the insignia of marriage - around her neck, were further cultural indications that it was not necessary for us to inquire from her about her husband. She carried the image of not only age but widowhood also. She was a Vellala woman, from the highest caste in the Jaffna social structure. And, with the confidence of her years, she narrated her family history, revealing all the sociological criteria of the typical Jaffna Vellala community. Traditional property owners, she and her husband invested much of their wealth in the education of their children. Indeed, one of the distinctive features of the Jaffna Tamils is their passion for education, and they pursue it with interest and determination. The Hindu goddess of education, 'Sarasvati' is highly venerated and festivals in honour and worship of her are enthusiastically participated in and practised, particularly by the women, in Jaffna society. Furthermore, Jaffna society is unique, in my experience, for its conception of enjoyment and pleasure in learning and the pursuit of knowledge. That human beings should aspire to learn is taken for granted as an expected human value. For the Jaffna Tamils, education is the key to social mobility, material prosperity and high social status. It is also considered crucial to a cultured life and decent social behaviour and responsibility. More than likely, as a young mother, this proud woman would have channelled her son's interests into a favourite profession of the aspiring Tamil community - medicine. As a dominant mother figure, passionately interested to secure a prosperous future for her son she would have expended a great deal of time and energy in encouraging and providing the space for him to spend many hours in private study. She would have woken him up early in the morning, prepared him a tea or coffee or milk if he wanted it, and encouraged him to make the best use of the cool, fresh morning before he went to school, for extra study. After school, tuition sessions in the evening would have boosted his

academic endeavours. And these routines and obligations she would have exercised with all her children, in one degree or another. And she was successful: her son qualified as a doctor at the Jaffna University and, taking the best road to promotion available to the Tamil community in Sri Lanka, he had gone abroad. In fact, all her children had gone to foreign lands. But the flip side to her success story was the loneliness and isolation she was now subjected to. This dignified elderly lady embodied the tragedy of many parents who had trodden the same path. And now, at this very old age, when the light of life is slowly fading away, she missed the joy, the emotional warmth, care and security of her children, grandchildren, maybe even her great grand children. Confined to an enclosed existence of her ancestral land and the house, she was condemned to a life of loneliness and misery. A hint of resentment and sadness could be discerned as she lamented the fact that she rarely saw a letter from foreign countries. But the plight of this stoic, independent, grand old lady, and many others like her, was a product of the times. The state oppression and persecution of the Tamil community prevented her from realising her aspirations for the steady social and economic progress of her children in her own homeland. Thus, she relinquished the comfort of the extended family in old age by opting to send her children into what she believed was a better future abroad. Furthermore, emotionally attached to her ancient, hereditary land and property, and with the familiarity and security of her culture, she would prefer to remain behind. And so when we went into the house we found this little lady, with a mat to sleep on and a bed sheet to keep her warm at night, attending to a few minor tasks in the darkness of the kitchen. But she did as the society expected of a woman of her years, and treated us with grandmotherly kindness.

While Pottu Amman went to a safe house in a different area, Nadesan, a senior cadre from Valvettiturai remained with us. He was compelled to leave his wife and children for safer ground after the Indian troops stepped up search operations in his village. Nadesan spent many hours hiding between boards in the walls of his house while the Indian troops searched the place looking for him. Tamilenth, a close confidante of Mr. Pirabakaran and a senior LTTE cadre in charge of finance for the entire organisation, had also joined us. His only piece of luggage was a leather bag full of cash and jewellery, the LTTE's finance, which he kept close to him at all times. Tamilenth would come and go from our group, but realised it was too dangerous to stay in Vadamarachchi and he eventually left us and headed for the jungles of Vanni. Unfortunately, on his way, he was caught in an army roundup and imprisoned in Kankesanthurai jail for the duration of the Jaffna occupation. This iron willed man was severely tortured by the Indians. Nevertheless, Tamilenth's resolve endured and they were unsuccessful in their attempts to break him. Not a word of information passed his lips. He was released when the Indians withdrew from Jaffna and he quickly recovered the finance from its hidden place and handed it over to Mr. Pirabakaran. He remains an LTTE stalwart and continues to manage the finances of the organisation. But it was Tamilenth who, seeing the danger we were in, sent an urgent message to Mr. Pirabakaran in the jungles of Vanni to make immediate arrangements for us to be taken out of the area. The difficult communication network delayed a response and we were compelled to undergo many more dangers before we eventually received a reply.

While I fully appreciated the value of the people's support to one's morale in our situation, I

hadn't understood the full dimensions of underground life. And so, when Sukla informed me that we would have to move again, and probably within a few days, I learned that another crucial aspect of underground survival was to balance the time between staying put and keeping on the move. For obvious reasons, staying in one place for too long has its risks. But too frequent a transfer of places can also lead one into the clutches of the very forces one is trying to avoid. We had calculated that only two or three days were required for our presence in an area to become well known. One of the reasons for this was my colour. Whereas most of the cadres moved around Vadamarachchi during the day in civvies, and Bala too, managed to disguise himself effectively with a farmers towel around his head, shaven face and a scruffy appearance, I could not. All that was required was for the people to see me walking to the outside toilet and our presence was revealed and we would have to consider moving on again. Once known to the people, the information travels like wild fire, and we therefore became vulnerable to army roundups. But so far we had been relatively successful in keeping just one step ahead of the Indians. Subsequently our next move was to from Karaveddy to Navindal, a village a few miles away, and, till then, free from Indian penetration.

Our Navindal house reunited us with Pottu Amman. When we met him again he was obviously uncomfortable and he requested me to dress his oozing armpit wound. The hot sticky weather had quickly turned his wet dressings into a breeding ground of infection. Pottu Amman had also developed a secondary complication from his abdominal wound and he was experiencing episodes of pain. Without access to diagnostic equipment we had no idea of the cause of the problem or how to deal with it. I gave him a mild injection but with little success. He moaned throughout the night, which added to the danger of our situation. Apart from barking dogs, which became our major source of information on the movement of Indian troops, Vadamarachchi was dead quiet during the night, so his moans were like echoes in a canyon and could be easily picked up by troops if they happened to be in the area. Pottu Amman's wounds made him easily identifiable and vulnerable, and he was unable to walk long distances: he had to be carried from one place to the next, in a huge wicker chair on the shoulders of our cadres. For me to keep my whereabouts secret it was necessary to either travel under cover of darkness or hide my colour with a bed-sheet wrapped around me as a sick person does. We decided to move under the cover of darkness to our next location in Nelliady.

Supporters of the LTTE had offered us a small house on their land in Nelliady to stay in. It was a small traditional residence whose character had been fashioned by time. It must have been about one hundred years old. Its endurance can be attributed to the local raw materials used in its construction. Stones had been cemented together with 'chonampu', the locally ground limestone, one of Jaffna's main natural resources. Using this same material, the walls had been plastered and smoothed making a strong and enduring structure. As was typical of old houses it had two small rooms with tiny windows and a small cooking area. The stove was just local clay moulded into pot supports. The house was situated in the corner of a plot of land shaded by a gracious old margosa tree, probably as old as the house itself. In the backyard, within walking distance of the cooking area, was a sizeable well with plenty of cool, clean, fresh water.

We enjoyed the support of the people in this area and we felt we would be safe and able to remain in the house for a few days before we moved on again. Sukla was in the process of arranging our next camp and he needed time to confirm the arrangement. Our cadres were carrying out reconnaissance work and there were no indications of troop movement in the area. But, as we learned from this experience, there was no place for complacency or over confidence. If one was to survive, one had to remain constantly alert and vigilant at all times.

A Raid on Our House

Again, it was late afternoon when the incident took place. I was gathering some firewood from the surrounding land. Unexpectedly, some small children came running to the house agitated and short of breath, struggling to convey to us that a patrol of Indian soldiers were stealthily making their way along the lane in the direction of our house. No sooner had the children finished giving us their information when some other local people in the area came rushing with the news that they too had spotted an army patrol, but from a different direction. Pottu Amman heard this and sat up, alerted. His years of experience in outwitting and fighting his way out of round ups of his jungle bases by the Sri Lankan army in Batticaloa, had taught him when to be concerned about the information he was receiving on the movements of troops. Another report came of troops moving in from a different direction. A picture quickly unfolded of a major round-up of our house by Indian troops. It appeared they were moving in strength, from different directions, encircling our camp and systematically closing off escape routes. The situation was grave and tense. My mind quickly sorted priorities and anticipating that we would have to move out, and move quickly, I immediately brought Bala's insulin bag within reach, as the most important item I needed to carry if we were to make a getaway. At that moment, Sukla came speeding back on a bicycle to inform us that contingents of Indian troops were just a few hundred yards away and moving in quickly. I grabbed the medicine bag, we slipped into our rubber flip-flops and Bala and I rushed out of the house. Pottu Amman struggled to his feet, and leaning on a cadre assisting him, limped out of the house holding his stomach as he went. Kandiah, one of the local cadres with us, edged forward, scouting the area for an escape route, beckoning us to follow him when it was safe. To our good fortune, a contingent of troops made a serious error. They were slow in taking up their positions and had not yet completed the encirclement, allowing us just enough time for us to cross that vital lane. We could see the troops further along the lane going from house to house, conducting a search operation. We banked on their concentration on their job, and one by one, we crossed the lane and broke out of the closing trap. The local people, having understood the situation we were in, silently pointed us in directions away from the Indian troops.

As we slipped out from the location and escaped, we could hear a volley of gunfire in the direction of the house we had just vacated. Later, we gathered the full story of the aborted round up from the local people. Contingents of jawans, guided by an EPRLF informant, swooped on the place and took up positions in a tight circle around the house with their

firearms ready. The nervous troopers then shouted, demanding that we come out, one by one with our hands raised. There was absolute silence and nothing moved in the house. Having lost their patience, the 'peacekeepers' opened fire with their automatic weapons on the empty house. They soon realised their error. We had outsmarted the raiding Indian patrols.

The troops exacted their retribution on the owner of the house, Mr. Markundu. An Assistant Government Agent at that time, Mr. Markundu was taken into custody where he was brutally beaten. After a few days of ill treatment in custody he was released with a warning of dire consequences if he was ever caught providing assistance or accommodating LTTE cadres again. This was a serious concern for Mr. Markundu. He had a teenage daughter and his son Vijayan was an LTTE cadre. Given the notorious record of rapes by Indian troops during their military campaign in Jaffna, he was extremely worried that any future punishment might be metered out on her. But this generous and courageous man was never compromised. Since the army maintained a continuous surveillance of the place, we never considered returning to his house again.

It was obvious from this critical situation we had escaped from, that Pottu Amman's injuries constrained his mobility. Cordon and search operations became daily events as the troops stepped up their hunt for LTTE cadres in Vadamarachchi. It was imperative for Pottu Amman to leave the area so he could receive proper medical care and rest if he was to survive. Finally, arrangements were made to send him by sea to Tamil Nadu, India for medical treatment, and he left our group. The other injured cadres had their own contacts and sources and had moved out for care with them. We continued our struggle for survival.

The Indians kept up their search for us and we kept on the move. As the political leader in the area, the Indians were also hunting Sukla, so his regular ventures out to set up new safe houses involved considerable risk on his part. It was his knowledge of the area, which allowed him to avoid capture, for the time being. He could not, for example, move openly in the heart of the Nelliady town. Since the jawans had absolutely no idea of what their enemy looked like they utilised the devious strategy of stationing masked informants in populated areas, to identify LTTE cadres and helpers. If a suspected LTTE cadre was spotted the informant was expected to indicate to the troops by nodding his head in the direction of the suspect. The identified suspect is then arrested and taken into custody. The Tamil people call these despised informants 'thalaiyardis' or, literally in English, a 'a person who nods his head'. Fortunately for our cadres we were always tipped off if the army had stationed a 'thalaiyardi' in the market or at sentry points and they avoided the area altogether.

Sukla also made arrangements with his female relatives and friends to provide food for us. Vadamarachchi is famous for its cooking of very hot curry dishes and we were generously provided with a variety of these. I have no idea how many loyal and caring anonymous women spent time and risked their lives to carefully prepare tasty dishes of food for us. Kandiah was given the task of collecting the food and he would find his way safely through the lanes to the houses where the food had been prepared and bring it back to all of us. In other ways too, the people were generous in their support and assistance. For example, afternoon teatime is a special time of the day when Tamil women often cook sweets or a savoury dish to eat with

tea. If the people knew of our presence in the area it was not unusual for a little boy or girl to come running up to me, carefully carrying a woven box containing either freshly cooked sweets or a savoury dish sent by his or her mother. When women cooked for temple festivals they invariably sent me a silver platter upon which there would be neatly placed bananas and a small bowl of sweet rice called 'pukai' or a specially cooked sweet called 'morthagam' which was one of my favourites. I had never met these ladies but they were emotionally generous to think of me and share their family food with us. Such small acts of kindness were instrumental in making me feel I was part of them and I belonged.

Sukla's and our cadres' constant intermingling with the population kept us well informed of the army's campaign in Vadamarachchi. Cordon and search operations had become routine military procedures throughout the area. The more searches they conducted, the more we learned about their modus operandi. We observed that they executed the cordon off operations using either of two strategies. Contingents of troops would suddenly swoop (usually early in the morning) from different directions, seal off an area and proceed to conduct their search. But more typically, small patrols of troops would advance from different directions - perhaps even different camps - casually move in and take up positions, isolate an area, prevent the people from coming and going, and then undertake house to house, building to building searches. Obviously the Indian military hierarchy viewed these operations as central to a successful counter insurgency strategy. But in reality, these sustained searches were their points of greatest weakness. This form of military harassment became an unpopular exercise and permanently cost the Indians the hearts and minds of the Tamil people. It was during these operations, troops forcefully intruded and violated the privacy of people's homes, and some of the worst excesses by the Indians took place. The Indian commanders and troopers, most of whom were inducted into the Tamil homeland from the conflict zones of Northern India, were alien to the life, language and culture of this peace loving community, proud of its values and traditions. Faced with an invisible enemy that constantly dissolves and disappears in the sea of civilians, the alien army began to view all the Tamils as potential Tigers or Tiger supporters. The ignorant jawans had no idea of the nature and history of the Tamil freedom movement. Furthermore, and most importantly, the 'peacekeepers' had lost the purpose and meaning of their mandated mission in Tamil areas. Without any guidance from a disciplined command structure, the Indian troopers wandered aimlessly in the villages, inhumanely persecuting the civilians under the guise of Tiger hunting. Once inside the households the Indian jawans transformed into merciless brutes violating the basic norms of human decency. Rape, theft, thuggery, assault of innocent people became a regular procedure of the so-called search operations. To identify one suspect, entire villages were uprooted and thousands of people were marched off to public grounds on massive identification parades. Several elderly persons have told me that the Indian jawans marched them out of their houses and forced them to kneel along the roads for hours in the hot sun. Irrespective of age, all civilians underwent experiences of utter humiliation. Those who were arrested on suspicion were held incommunicado in various detention centres. Torture under interrogation was a routine practice. Women were vulnerable and defenceless when confronted by armed jawans, and despite their pleas for mercy, many were molested and violently gang raped. Indeed a sixty-year old lady friend of

ours secretly confided to me her humiliation when three young, armed jawans barged into her house, forcefully separated her from her sick and disabled elderly husband, dragged her into a room and gang raped her. This reserved and dignified elderly lady choked back tears as she unburdened herself of her painful experience to me. The privacy of people's lives was further violated as wardrobes, and cupboards were ransacked and precious jewellery and money and whatever took their fancy, became part of the troops' booty. The theft of domestic animals from people's estates to supplement their army diet, was a routine part of troop operations. This unruly, undisciplined behaviour coupled with indiscriminate brutality and sexual violence by the jawans throughout the North and east, terrorised and deeply humiliated the national pride of the Tamil people, and at the same time, fostered a deep hatred and seething resentment towards the Indian occupation army.

As the days turned to weeks, the escalation of military operations was paralleled by an intensification of the people's fear. Nevertheless, in times of crisis, people often rise up to the occasion and confront the challenge of the situation in unexpected and remarkable ways. Examples of courage and sacrifice surfaced from unexpected quarters and in general, despite the military oppression, the people's will remained unbroken. So, despite the pervasive atmosphere of fear in the area, there were always courageous and sympathetic souls who allowed us to use their houses as safe places. Furthermore, with our knowledge of where the Indians were operating and our familiarity with the mode of execution of their cordon and search strategy, we constantly tried to avoid staying in areas where we were likely to run into trouble. But once the Indians had completed their systematic search of Vadamarachchi they injected into their counter insurgency campaign a strategy of random cordon and search operations. This introduced a new complication in our struggle to survive in Vadamarachchi. Any area could be identified and singled out for searches. Now we had to live on the edge, expecting roundups of our house at any time of the day or night. And so it was to be.

Property in Jaffna

We went to a safe house in Karanavai East. The family structure at this particular place was widely representative of the Jaffna social structure. The family relations within this safe house exhibited all the elements of a matrilineal family system in practice. In Jaffna social formation, where matrilineal system of inheriting property predominates, women and their descendants living in two or three houses next to one another within the perimeters of one piece of land is a common construction of family relations. Here, we had two average sized houses on a sizeable piece of land. The modern house belonged to the younger women and her three children and the older designed house belonged to the woman's elderly mother. While I didn't like to pry into their personal life, we could be almost certain that the houses were owned by the women of this family because it is to women houses are dowered at the time of marriage. Undoubtedly, either one of the houses and all the land would be devolved to the only daughter in the family. And so the traditional ancient laws of property succeeding to women as written in the Thesawalamai would be perpetuated. Just as typical as the family

relations on this land was the organisation of a small, self-sustaining household economy. First and foremost were the coconut trees - probably planted by the elderly lady when she was a young woman- providing the family with a plentiful supply of coconuts, which are needed as an essential ingredient in all Tamil cooking. From this tree, the thrifty ladies would dry the stems of the coconut tree leaves and secure for the family a constant supply of firewood. The remaining part of the leaf is either left for a few days to dry in the hot sun and then plaited and used for roofs on small sheds or for fences around the house or are sold for a small income. Taking the procedure one step further, the green part of the leaf is stripped off to expose a tough long needle which, when tied into a bundle, is suitable as a hand broom for sweeping the compound. The most resourceful are the palmyrah trees, that descriptive natural symbol of Jaffna: a tall, straight tree that grows wild in Jaffna. Every part of this extraordinary plant, from the leaves to its roots, serves a purpose to the people. Its leaves are used for roofing, fencing and cattle fodder. Its fruit is succulent and sweet. The stalk of the flower is used to produce the local alcohol called 'toddy'. The bark is used for firewood. Its tough strong trunk has formed the central pillar of Tamil houses for centuries, and the roots are dried and eaten in various forms. These resourceful magnificent trees form the backbone of the rural economy. The resources from these trees kept the ladies of the house busy all day. In the compound of the house a small area of land had been cleared and onions and green chillies - vital ingredients for cooking - were growing. Aubergine plants were waiting to flower and the fruit from the plant would become a regular curry for the family. The excess production of aubergines would be sold in the market to provide the family with small cash income. Clumps of banana trees, surrounding the well, were flourishing on water feeding into them through mini irrigation canals specially dug to drain away dirty water from around the well. Bananas are eaten either after meals or with a particular preparation of flour food called 'pittu' for breakfast or the evening meal. Extra bunches of bananas would also go for sale at the local market. The flower of the banana tree is specially prepared and cooked for a tasty vegetable dish. Once the bunch of bananas has been harvested, the banana plant is cut down to ground level and fed to the cows and the new banana tree sprouting from the root is left to grow. Chickens would have provided the eggs, and meat for curries also. Goats gave milk and fertiliser and so did the cow.

But despite these movable and immovable assets, the family was short on one very vital resource, cash. And that was why the father of the children was not at home and his wife assumed the head of the household. The father of these three children -a small boy, and another one of about fourteen years and a teenage girl around thirteen years old - would need money in the future for several reasons. Their first concern would be for the higher education of their children. If the children were successful in achieving the entry marks to the Jaffna University or any other in Sri Lanka then the future education of the children would not necessarily be a problem. But since the Tamils had to achieve higher marks than their Sinhala counterparts to gain university places, the competition was stiff. Of the thousands competing for university places only a few students gained admission. If the son were clever but not brilliant enough to score the very high examination marks to secure a university place, the parents would immediately aspire to send their son out of the country for a foreign education.

The son, in turn, if successful in achieving his professional qualification, would then earn and save for the education of his brother and, equally as important, his sister's dowry. And the daughter's dowry would be the second major parental concern. The young girl might aspire for a professional career but for Jaffna parents, arranging and securing a successful and prosperous marriage for their daughter was the greatest obligation they had to perform for her. For that to become a reality the family would need money, and plenty of it. Although the daughter would be guaranteed her hereditary property, it could be insufficient to meet the rampant dowry demands in Jaffna. Cash would be required to build or augment the daughter's dowry. So if these parental obligations and high social aspirations were to be fulfilled it had been necessary for the father of the family to leave the country in search of employment. For a variety of social reasons widowhood, separation, disappearance or husbands abroad woman-headed families have become a common family structure amongst the Tamil community throughout the North and east. The elderly lady had been widowed for many years. So here we had a social situation where two resilient and strong women were managing the family and their estates in these extremely adverse circumstances.

Our small group went to stay in the elderly lady's house. Regardless of their heavy responsibilities, these two ladies were extremely hospitable and were kind enough to cook and share their food with us. The children, in particular the older boy, would come and visit us regularly. But, despite the warmth of the social environment, this house became bad luck for us. On several occasions we were subjected to army round ups. On one occasion we were tipped off that there were indications of an army round up of that area in the early morning. It was late at night when this information came to us, but we had to move. Our group, silhouetted against the moonlit sky, walked over the banks of rice fields as we crossed from one place to another. We trudged through the twists and turns in the lanes and balanced precariously on cycle bars as cadres pushed us to our next destination. But, as time went on and the tension mounted, of more concern to Bala and myself than death, was our determination not to be parted. The fear of one of us getting separated from the other or caught or killed was so compelling we were driven together like nothing ever before. Subsequently, our overriding concern during extreme crisis was to stay very close and to lookout for each other. Any suggestions that separating would enhance our chances of survival were rebuffed outright and never raised again. It was suggested to me that I could be safe in a Catholic convent in Karaveddy where I could camouflage as a nun. I flatly refused.

I often became Bala's eye at night, directing him through the lanes and across paddy fields. Bala, with poor night vision, would frequently place his arm on my shoulder and I led him through the lanes. Similarly, as the only woman in the group, the intimacy formed through marriage was invaluable, as Bala worked with me in maintaining my dignity and privacy. For me, it was the small things that mattered. He always made sure toilet facilities were made available to me first and whenever I needed them. It was not unusual to hear Bala shouting at someone to get out of the toilet because 'Auntie' was waiting. Likewise when I bathed. Most of the houses in Jaffna, particularly the older ones, don't have indoor bathrooms. People wash at the wells in the back of the house. Drawing water and dousing oneself with buckets of cool fresh water while the gentle wind blows across the body, is a particularly pleasurable

commutation with nature, which only those who have experienced it would understand. Young men gather together at the well in their sarongs or underpants and leisurely wash and really don't bother who sees them. Women are constrained by a sarong wrapped around them and tied in the front at the chest, and washing is usually less of an event than it is for the men. But I was not used to this mode of washing and I never did get used to it. I was more familiar with stripping down and washing with buckets of water in the privacy of a bathroom. So more often than not I waited till night to bathe, and Bala would chase everybody away and clear the area so I could wash privately. He would then slowly draw the buckets of cool water from the well and spill them over me; and we pondered our circumstances and life during those moments. But there was also a survival element involved in this process. It was these washing times when we were at our most vulnerable and he was required to keep an eye out if there was a round up by the army. Indeed one of the main fears I had was that there would be an army round up when I was standing stark naked and washing or in the toilet. For this reason our bathroom necessities were, more often than not, undertaken in haste rather than at leisure.

A Gentle Woman

By now we had adapted our survival underground tactics to meet the army's different operational moves and to deal with the pervasive fear amongst the population. We shifted our safe houses either at night or, to create some confusion in our movements, we would sometimes make a shift before sunrise. We didn't altogether rule out daylight travel but reserved it for emergency or extraordinary circumstances. Fear of the Indian army's punitive action closed many of the people's doors to our needs and we found ourselves in the unsatisfactory situation of unwisely returning to old haunts. Regular sightings of Indian army patrols wherever we went, placed us on twenty-four hour alert. In other words we could expect the army to pop up at any place at any time, although routine night patrols had not yet been introduced as a part of their strategy. So when we arrived at Radhi's house one of our supporters in Navindil in the late night, drenched to the skin after travelling from Karaveddy in a monsoon shower, I felt her hospitality to us as one of the most warm and memorable moments in my life.

Radhi was expecting us when we arrived at her house. We were greeted by a warm smell of 'pittu' cooking on the stove. She herself was sitting on the floor with a candle flickering for light, preparing more of this flour dish for us. Her three young children surrounded her; each had been allocated a cooking task. Some of our cadres were also helping her in various ways. She immediately came forward to meet us, and even though we were dripping wet, she gently ushered us into the room she had specially prepared for us. When I entered the room I was taken aback by the overwhelming atmosphere of social warmth. The room was simple and spotlessly clean, two beds had been arranged, one on each side of the room and beside each stood small bed tables: similar to a simple lodge room. But Radhi had added a touch of herself by placing small flasks of hot water with sugar and tea and a small jar of milk powder on the bed table. It all added up to a 'you are welcome' atmosphere.

Radhi took me outside to a huge ‘thoddi’, a concrete bath like structure, built and used by the farmers for storing water for irrigation and quite often washing. It was full to the brim with water. She brought me a towel and a new cake of soap, handed me a bowl to scoop water with and I stood in the warm monsoon rain and had a wash. Bathing at the well while the warm rain pelts down is not an uncommon sight in Jaffna, particularly amongst the young people. Although this practice embodies a contradiction, it is one of those experiences, which makes Jaffna life special. Having cleaned myself up, Radhi served us a meal: hot, fluffy ‘pittu’ with an omelette made with plenty of minutely chopped onions and green chillies, followed by a ripe sweet ‘cathaly’ banana. Since we had just arrived at this house and it was unlikely that anybody knew of our presence and the army was not yet on night patrols, I felt I could sleep peacefully. It was the consciousness of a feeling of peace as I was about to shut my eyes that made me realise I had been living under extreme mental stress.

This concrete house, although not very big, was in stark contrast to Radhi’s economic circumstances. A slim woman in her late 20s, Radhi’s life, since the time of her marriage, was a history of deception, disappointment and financial crisis. Since her eldest son was around the age of eight or nine we can guess Radhi married in her early twenties. Her husband was a businessman who did most of his dealings in South India. His visits home became less frequent until, inevitably, he didn’t come back. Radhi’s husband had established a ‘second’ wife in South India. He actually abandoned Radhi and her three small children. With no real skills with which she could earn an income, Radhi’s life became a constant struggle to feed and clothe her children. Interestingly, despite all her hardships Radhi was committed to the education of her children and refused to allow her poverty to stand in the way of their education opportunities. In typical Tamil thinking, and more particularly in her situation, Radhi saw the redemption of her family through the education of her children. She stretched herself and her resources to make this possible. Apart from the interruptions to their lives caused by the wars, Radhi, with single-minded determination, ensured the children continued with their studies. During our stay Radhi told her story of how she struggled to protect her children from the aerial and artillery bombardment during ‘Operation Liberation’ by the Sri Lankan army. Since there was no bunker at her house in Valvettiturai, she and her terrified children huddled together under the flimsy protection of the beds. Her life story was pathetic and I wondered where she drew her resources of mental and emotional strength to cope with her tragedy. The socio-economic conditions of abandoned women in Jaffna are quite different phenomena to those of abandoned women in the West. Unless the extended family is prepared to financially support these women, their plight becomes dire. The assistance of a state welfare system is not available to them. Radhi searched for any menial work, which would provide her with enough rupees for the day to feed her children.

One night, Soosai, the LTTE’s Vadamarachchi commander came to see us. Soosai had himself narrowly escaped round up operations. The quick thinking of his protectors hid him behind a rolled up sleeping mat with clothes piled on top off it, which, to his good luck, the Indians over looked. Perhaps the ‘hiding’ place was so obvious they couldn’t believe anybody would be there and didn’t touch it. Incredible stories of narrow escapes and original, undetectable hiding places were rife during this time. Some cadres spent long hours tucked in the rooftops

of houses while the Indians in the rooms below them carried out their search. Others are known to have buried themselves in haystacks and tobacco leaves. In desperation, cadres had plunged into septic tanks for refuge. So it was wise of Soosai to confine his movements to the cover of darkness. He informed us that instructions had been given by the LTTE leadership to send us away to India by boat when the weather and sea conditions were satisfactory. But, he added, we would have to manage for some more time.

Our few days at Radhi's house passed without any difficulties or complications. But to push our luck and stay any longer would have invited unnecessary danger for all of us. We moved on.

Toddy Tappers

There were many downsides in our experience of being fugitives from the Indians. But there were upsides also. I had the opportunity to meet a cross section of people in a variety of social situations from the Jaffna social structure. And so when we went to stay in an ancient village in Tunnalai, in the heart of Vadamarachchi, I was fortunate to meet and enjoy the hospitality and generosity of the people from the toddy tapping community. This particular extended family were ardent supporters of the LTTE. They lived in what could be called a family hamlet. One of their houses was a small cement structure with two rooms opening onto a veranda, which ran the full width of the house. The kitchen was a neat, separate, single room mud hut. It was here that the women in the family gathered and cooked over the single-pot wood fire. Two huge mango trees formed a cool canopy over the house. Just outside the compound was a jungle of palmyrah trees with dense thorny bushes as undergrowth. The owner of the house generously moved his family to his relative's house out the back so that we could temporarily occupy his place. The relative's house was a thatched roof mud cottage. A palmyrah leaf fence separated the two houses. The big open well was in the compound of this house.

This particular community of people belongs to the toddy tapping caste in the Jaffna social structure, which harvests a natural alcohol called 'toddy' from the stalks of both coconut and palmyrah flower. This cloudy brew is popular with the Jaffna men and is widely consumed, particularly at lunchtime and late evening, soon after the 'toddy' has been freshly gathered. There is a constant demand for the alcoholic brew. Some men are regular consumers of the brew and have bottles of the fresh toddy delivered like milk to their houses every day. But more commonly, men can be seen around lunchtime heading in one direction, pushing their bikes to the local shabbily built toddy shop somewhere on the edge of town or in a hastily built shed on an unused piece of land. So when one travels in Jaffna and sees dozens of bikes parked outside what would appear to be a shack, and it is near midday, one can safely assume that is the toddy shop.

These families however, were not only involved in harvesting and selling toddy, but other small cottage industries centred on the resources of the versatile palmyrah tree. To put it more clearly,

this family was hard working and enterprising. Their income was sufficient to maintain their financial independence and dignity. But they were far from wealthy. Ironically, this skilled, hardworking and proud people were designated at the bottom of the social organisation of the Jaffna community. Throughout my years in both India and Sri Lanka I was never able to reconcile my abhorrence of the casteism. A social system, which condemns human beings to a specific social status by birth, it is both primitive and oppressive. Though this system is embedded in the economic and cultural life of the Jaffna society, casteism is the antithesis to modern thought which postulates dignity and respect for human labour. Indeed, in my observation of the Jaffna society I found the designation of particular communities as 'high' and 'low' to be based on spurious criteria. Could there be any justification to demean a community of hard working, self sustaining, resourceful and socially productive people as 'low'. But I was to learn a great deal more about the inconsistencies in Jaffna society during my stay with this family. I was quite amused and smiled to myself when I discovered that the so-called 'high' caste Vellala men crept into this neighbouring toddy house every evening. They spent hours sipping toddy from a bowl-shaped container made of palmyrah leaves, eating snacks of fried fish, fried prawns etc made from the 'polluted' hands of these 'low' caste women. It was comforting to know how quickly these socially constructed categories and practices of 'high' and 'low' disappear under the influence of a good drink. Even more interesting was the fascinating political analysis of the current situation. It was a first hand sociological study of public opinion: of the people's thinking and sentiments. Debates, discussions and heated arguments were thrashed out. The Indian 'peace keepers' and their atrocities were the main topic of discussion and criticism. But from the drunken ramblings of the toddy consumers we could discern a general public sympathy for the LTTE cadres or, in more popular terms, 'the boys'. The LTTE leadership also did not escape the astute criticism of the inebriated consumers. Nevertheless, totally oblivious to our presence, the uninhibited dialogues of the toddy tappers' patrons kept us interested and amused during our otherwise idle evenings. Somewhat seduced by the pleasantness of the environment we were shaken back into the reality of our circumstances when some cadres came running to warn us of an approaching Indian army patrol. We immediately packed our backs ready to move out. In the meantime, when we were all set to vacate, the house owner rushed in and told us not to be hasty and agitated: the jawans were looking for a place to drink toddy. So, while the house owner and his family coolly and confidently satisfied the Indian patrol with the toddy at the back of the house, we waited, on the alert, in the front, and relaxed only when the drunken troops staggered into the darkness.

While living amongst these people I encountered a small, yet highly embarrassing problem. There were no toilets in this or any surrounding houses. For most people in the community this is not even an issue. The bushes in the palmyrah jungles serve the purpose well and for that reason are never cleared. It was not a problem for Bala either; he just had to return to his childhood to remember how to manage. For me, it was a particular problem accentuated by my colour. The green foliage was inadequate camouflage for white buttocks, which would certainly have been objects of curiosity if noticed by passers by. So once again, the intimacy between Bala and myself came into play. The only option for us was to get up very early in

the morning before daybreak and beat the 'queue' to the bushes. Normally women rise early and perform their ablutions and clear the area before the men's session gets underway. By the time the men make their visits to an unused bush, scores of scavenging crows are waiting in the branches for their breakfast. So Bala and I got up at 4 a.m., while everybody else who would also normally be up at that time, politely pretended to be asleep. I prepared him a cup of tea to help make him 'regular' and therefore not have to take bathroom trips to the bushes during the daylight. I'm sure Balasingham found squatting in the bushes would have evoked much humour and curiosity amongst the village people. Bala wasn't keen on such a scenario either. After tea I would go to the well and slowly draw a bucket of water. Then, once ready with the water for washing, Bala would take the lantern in one hand and a six-foot stick in the other. He would go ahead of me, winding his way along a narrow dirt track, and banging this pendulous stick on the undergrowth in front of him, while I followed closely behind with the bucket of water. I enquired from him the rationale of tapping the ground with the stick. He explained that the area was infested with cobras and the tapping of the stick on the ground would deter them and they would slither off out of our way. I thought this was good thinking. I had no wish for an outraged snake to sink its poisonous fangs into my bare buttocks. Some yards from our house we found a 'squatting' place and Bala went off and I went the other way, but in close enough proximity to catch a few rays of light from the lantern. It was not a very satisfactory arrangement at all. I think the only thing I learned from this exercise was just how inhibited I was. Nevertheless, we did what we had to do, and using the same track and the same tapping procedure and passing some women heading off to where we had been, we returned to the house.

Experience had taught me that one of my first tasks on arrival at a safe house was to reconnoitre the area for hiding places and escape routes. There didn't appear to be many places to hide in this area. And so when I saw some sunken graves with gapping holes separating the earth from the tombstone I thought that at least one of us could fit in there. I had no doubt the troops would not have come near the small, dilapidated cemetery. Thank God I never had to avail myself of this most hideous of hiding places.

While we were relatively undisturbed by army intrusion during our stay with these people I am sad to say it did not turn out that way for the family after our departure. But that again is to pre-empt the story. We did however visit this family after our return to Jaffna in 1990 to thank them for their hospitality.

Critical Days

The Indian military campaign against the LTTE cadres in Vadamarachchi was having limited success in terms of inflicting casualties on the LTTE. A few cadres were killed when caught in round up operations; some were captured and taken into custody. But essentially the troops were unable to root out the network of cadres from their well-protected hideouts. The disarming operations became a major counter insurgency campaign against the guerrilla fighters

who, in classical Maoist jargon, were like fishes in the sea. Much of the credit for the LTTE's success in eluding the determined Indians can be attributed to the loyalty and courage of the Vadamarachchi people. We have to salute the countless patriotic citizens who laid their lives on the line by providing the fugitive LTTE fighters with sanctuary in their homes and who spontaneously came forward with information on troop movements. Many lives were saved by such selfless acts of courage and participation in the struggle. Also civilians who were captured and suffered in detention camps as a consequence of their assistance to 'our boys' showed remarkable fortitude in coping up with the humiliations and torture they were subjected to. For the Indians, the only 'success' they could credit themselves with was the terrorisation of the innocent public. And this terror campaign by the Indian troops of the population reached its zenith when the troops extended their campaign into the night.

Since the outset of the Indo-LTTE war, a twelve-hour daily curfew from 6p.m virtually shut down the Vadamarachchi area. Apart from LTTE cadres and people like us moving from one place to the next, the area was enveloped by the silence of a graveyard at night. The night curfew facilitated the Indian military in singling out our cadres. Anybody violating the curfew, the Indians automatically assumed, must be an LTTE cadre. So, in a major development in its drive against the LTTE, the Indian military personnel intensified their campaign in the darkness. This added to the people's torment. Fearing the intrusion of Indian troops into their houses in sweeping search operations, the people could no longer sleep peacefully at night. Growing in shrewdness, the Indian army introduced night patrols. Nobody could be sure where the troops were or when they would appear. But a solution to the problem of tracking the movement of troops at night surfaced from an unexpected source.

Our cadres maintained sentries in their hide-outs as far as was possible. But there was nothing like the assistance in night security provided by that primordial friend of man's, the dog. Interestingly and unexpectedly it was the large population of domestic and stray dogs in Vadamarachchi, which proved to be the most efficient sentries throughout the area at night. We had observed that the village dogs rarely demonstrated any decisive response to our cadres as they moved around under the cover of darkness. But the presence of large numbers of Indian troops stomping in their heavy boots triggered of a raucous chorus of barking, that 'dogged' the troops as they patrolled the area. From the level of noise from the barking dogs we could easily gauge the proximity of troops to our camp. And to be certain, there was many a night we were grateful to those faithful creatures, as we lay awake tracking the troop movements through the fluctuating sound of dogs barking.

But patrolling did not exhaust the military options of the Indians in their night campaign against the LTTE cadres. Obviously hungry for a higher body count, the Indians expanded their night campaign by deploying troops to lie in ambush in ditches on the side of roads and lanes and under bridges, in a desperate bid to capture our cadres. This tactic of course made it increasingly dangerous for anybody to move around at night. Initially the element of surprise in the army strategy had its results. Until it became common knowledge that the Indian troops had set up ambushes at night, many unsuspecting civilians, compelled by circumstances to risk the lanes during the dark hours, were captured and beaten up and taken into custody

as LTTE suspects by the IPKF troops. But it was these intensified night operations which brought the Indians their biggest catch and pushed us into a final life and death struggle.

By the time the Indians' hunt for us had reached its closing chapter, the people of Vadamarachchi had been sufficiently terrorised by the Indian troops to be cautious and apprehensive of repercussions to them should the troops come to know we were in a particular area. Inevitably, the people were frightened of our presence in their vicinity. The depth of the people's fear was poignantly revealed to us when we were compelled to take emergency refuge in a house in a small village. That one should be the source of disturbing the people's peace and generate the painful emotion of fear in people pricked my conscience. But I was to face this uncomfortable situation when an entire village population, fearing brutal military reprisal, immediately vacated the area when they came to know we were staying in their village. Furthermore, this sudden emptying of a village of its people, we felt, might have alerted the army and we stayed awake all night in anticipation of a round up of our camp. Apart from the expectation that the army would soon be on top of us, we had no wish to perpetuate the people's inconvenience and we found it impossible to remain in this house. But this experience drove home to me the potential danger to people caused by my 'whiteness'. Any of the other cadres could have easily moved around Vadamarachchi totally unnoticed. But my colour exposed the entire group to danger. I started to consider painting myself with a light coating of mud or dressing in such away that only minimal amounts of my colour would be exposed. Perhaps, I thought, with a sheet worn in a semi Muslim style and my protruding feet covered with socks, nobody would identify me. Sick people often kept warm in this way, so there was nothing particularly odd about it. In the end I made a pitiful attempt to hide myself by draping a coloured bed-sheet around me and we left the village at around 4.am. Several hours later the village was subjected to a massive cordon and search operation.

And the hunt for us became relentless. We were constantly on the move, sometimes spending only a few hours in one place. Nevertheless, despite the pressure we were under Bala felt compelled to write a critique of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord for the public. As soon as we arrived at the safe house Bala would pull out his pen and paper and, struggling under the light of a dimly lit lantern, set out in Tamil a comprehensive critique of the Accord. After completion of the work, the hand written Tamil text was sent to a typist for typing. So while waiting for the script to be collected from the typist we made a stopover at the Karanavai house where a mother and her three children had previously accommodated us. When Sukla, our chief bodyguard, left our safe house around 8p.m to collect the text of the critique of the Accord from the typist, we had no idea that this trusted and reliable chap would never return to the house again.

Close Encounter

We had been informed that the troops had intensified their military operations in the area and that they were patrolling the lanes and streets throughout the night as well as the daytime. The

situation had become extremely dangerous. Nevertheless, Sukla felt certain that the danger during the day outweighed the risks of moving around at night. Moreover, he felt he knew the terrain well and he could avoid capture. He decided to go to the typist's house to collect the critique of the Accord. So, we expected him to attend to this task and return to base very quickly. In this increasingly perilous and tense situation he disappeared into the dark with advice from us not to take unnecessary risks and to be alert. None of us was happy that he was putting himself in such jeopardy. He was after all the most knowledgeable person in our group on the geography of the area and the whereabouts of safe houses. Unfortunately our uneasiness with his night venture proved to be justified. As the night grew deeper, uncharacteristically, Sukla had not returned. Fears for his safety mounted. Our concern turned to anxiety as time went on and still there was no sight of him. Fraught with the uncertainty of Sukla's plight, Ananth, one of the cadres with us, plunged into the dark in a bid to try to establish what had become of him. Ananth's failure to return upped the anxiety. A sense of foreboding loomed large over us. Circumstances had caught up with us. The only reassuring factor in the unfolding saga was the absence of gunfire shots and this encouraged us to believe they were still alive. But their disappearance sparked off a multitude of conjectures and speculations centring on their plight and how we should respond. Were they simply delayed; perhaps they would soon return. Should somebody else go out and look for them? If they had been caught would the army push on and round up our area on a hunch that more LTTE cadres might be undercover somewhere nearby. And then the most crucial issue for us: where to go if we do leave the house? Only Sukla knew where our next move would be. All these ideas were bandied about amongst us, the darkness of the house reflecting our mood. Suddenly, like a bolt from the sky, Ananth exploded into the house. The poor young fellow was in a state of panic. Motioning to us to quickly pack our bags and get ready to move, pieces of the story and Sukla's situation stumbled out of his mouth. The Indian troops were everywhere, he began, and Sukla had been ambushed and was tied up and being held captive not far from the house. Civilians too had been caught, he said. He himself had walked into the same ambush and was arrested. He had met Sukla at the point where the troops were holding the people they had captured. They were tied up and sitting as a group. Together they plotted for him to escape and to make a dash to warn us of the danger. By sheer good fortune the Indian troops were less alert. He had slowly worked loose the ropes he was tied up with. The moment the guards had looked away from their prisoners, he seized the opportunity and boldly jumped up and fled from captivity to our house to warn us of the perils surrounding us. He was certain the Indians were following him.

Our first impulse was to move from the house. I picked up Bala's bag of insulin; we slipped into our rubber flip-flops and rushed out into the night. Our group split in two and went in opposite directions, thinking that at least some of us might survive. We stumbled along in the dark, not knowing where we were or where we intended to go. After walking a short distance and the fresh air cleared our thinking it was obvious that by roaming blindly and aimlessly in the dark we had created the worst possible scenario. To continue walking along the lanes would have led us into the hands of the Indian troops we were trying to avoid. Our first priority was to get off the lanes. With that suggestion we immediately climbed through a

fence and into a vegetable garden a few feet off the lane. Sitting together amongst chilli plants we began to reflect on our situation. We knew the troops were everywhere; we had nowhere to go and Sukla had been caught. We sat quietly, weighing up possible options, when a distant murmur came to my ears. I hushed everyone indicating to keep quiet and freeze. I could hear a distant noise of people talking. As the talking came closer I indicated to everybody to lie down flat on the ground. We fell flat and pretended we couldn't be spotted under the chilli plants. The talking in Hindi language grew louder, and louder; the sound of heavy boots became a trudging. None of us wanted to breathe. The stars continued to shine over our petrified bodies. And the patrol of troops, just a few feet away, passed us by and they faded into the distance. Lady luck was with us. The troops were incompetent. They didn't scan the roadsides. We sat up and took a deep breath, and counted our blessings. Bala and the others immediately took off their light coloured shirts so they wouldn't stand out like a beacon in the dark; and we waited. A few minutes passed by when again we heard the sound of talking, and the noise of the troops. The same patrol had turned back and was heading in our direction; and they passed us as they had before. A shot rang out in the distance. I have no idea whom that the unlucky soul was.

It was obvious we couldn't stay where we were. With the break of dawn we would have been sitting targets for the troops. A dim light across the field offered a glimmer of hope. One of our cadres thought the farm looked familiar. But to get there we had to cross the open field. Our options, of course, were next to none and we decided to try for it. We lumbered across the ploughed land, stumbling on clods of earth, keeping as low as we could. A few yards seemed like a mile. Fortunately we knew the farm and we knew the people there and so we stayed for the night.

When the daylight came we moved back to Radhi's house. But not for long; the hunt was in full swing again. Around six in the evening, panic stricken people shouting that feared word "Army, Army," ran through the village warning everyone. We were totally ignorant that the round up of her house was part of the concerted sweep of our old haunts. The hunters were systematically checking out the known hideouts of their prey.

Kingsley jumped on a bicycle, Bala perched on the bar and they took off. I clambered onto the next one. We were going wherever the cadres took us. But at that moment I had no fear of the troops behind us; what concerned me more was to keep up with Bala on the bike in front of me as we wound our way at top speed through the lanes away from the jawans.

In the meantime a simultaneous, co-ordinated raid of our safe houses was well underway in Vadamarachchi. Contingents of troops swarmed into Radhi's house after we had gone. Nevertheless, with all her maternal energy galvanised behind the single, overriding purpose of protecting her children, coupled with the years of experience of coping in a difficult world in uniquely adverse circumstances, Radhi drew on her resources of courage and quick thinking. She successfully wangled her way out of a potentially brutal reprisal. She was 'let off' with a severe warning and thankfully no harm came to her and her children. The toddy tappers in Tunnalai were not so fortunate in their confrontation with the jawans. In an extensive round up of their area hostile troops swooped down on their houses looking for evidence to support the

information they had concerning the refuge the family had given to us. Anticipating that their teenage son would be the most obvious target for Indian reprisals, the parents immediately acted to protect him and sent him off into hiding before the troops arrived at their house. He fled the area and escaped capture. But it was impossible for the entire family to escape to safety. Being responsible and caring for the women in the family, the father remained in his house to promote their safety and to confront the unpredictable Indian troops. Subsequently, when they rounded up his house he took the brunt of the troops' revenge. Unable to find any substantial evidence that we had actually stayed there, the troops turned their anger and annoyance onto the owner of the property, brutally beating him on the spot and marching him off to the nearby camp where he was subjected to torture. This innocent man was held in detention and released six months later. The women headed family's house with three children was also pounced on. I was never able to discover or discern what reprisal they were subjected to. The empty Kaladai house, where we had lived with the injured cadres in the early days, became an Indian army camp. And so it went on throughout Vadamarachchi. All our safe houses were either occupied or searched, except one.

Confronting Death

Kingsley, our bodyguard from Karaveddy, took us back to the doctor's house, just in front of his parent's home. When we arrived there late at night, the area was quiet. We were not very comfortable about returning to a place that everybody knew we had often frequented. But we had no choice. There was nowhere else to go. But our discomfort turned to outright alarm when, about an hour after arriving there, the sound of barking dogs could be heard from the distant dark. Alerted, we wondered where the army was heading. But as the barking grew louder and seemed to be coming towards us, we suspected the army was on the move to round up our house. We scrambled out of the back and down the lane about thirty yards from the house, to an empty shed used as a store house next door to a cadjan cottage belonging to the Kingsley family. Because we hadn't eaten all day hunger pains gnawed at Bala's stomach. He drooled at the prospect of eating the delicious chicken curry and string hoppers (a traditional Tamil food made of rice flour) we could smell wafting from Kingsley's mother's stove. But the situation in Kingsley's household rapidly changed as the Indian troops suddenly entered the neighbouring doctor's house. All the families in the area were waiting in trepidation in anticipation of a midnight search operation. We saw Kingsley's mother digging a hole behind the house. Bala's face dropped when he noticed the old lady was burying the delicious curry and string hoppers specially prepared for him. Excessive quantities of freshly cooked food in the middle of the night in a small family would be difficult to explain to suspicious troops and so the food was dumped to ward off any unnecessary questions. The situation we faced now was more dangerous than the pain of hunger. We were surrounded by Indian troops and there seemed to be no escape this time.

Kingsley came running to warn us that a large group of troops was moving down the lane towards his parent's home. Obviously we were no longer in a situation to determine our own

destiny; circumstances had gone beyond our control. We had, it seemed, come to a face to face confrontation with India or rather death itself. Had we attempted to vacate our refuge, the troops would surely have seen us and shot us dead. We were lying on an old bed in this vacant shed, resigned to our fate. "Don't worry. A few bullets into the body may be momentarily painful and that will be it", Bala whispered to me. I was not frightened by this prospect. While the troops searched his parent's house, Kingsley hid himself in the shed with us expecting that his days were also over. We stayed put and kept quiet. Perhaps, just perhaps, they might not see us. That was our only faint hope. Whether it was purely resignation or an unconscious acceptance of impending death or just the fact that we were to die together I would be unable to say, but there was no panic or fear from any of us as we resigned to the unfolding events. The people in the surrounding homes braced themselves for what was to come to them. We could hear the troops jabbering in Hindi as they searched Kingsley's house and we waited for them to move to our building next. And then they were there. Torch lights flashed through the window and lit up our place and we held our breath. As the creeping sound of army boots approached our hiding place, I felt death was approaching. "They're coming," Bala whispered and put his arm over me as I pulled a bed-sheet up over my head not wanting to see the hail of bullets I was expecting. But, at the very moment when troops were about to enter the door, a voice intervened; it was Kingsley's brother-in-law. This quick thinking, courageous man stepped forward and distracted the troops by suggesting to them there was no point in searching that vacant shed. Nobody could possibly be inside that shed, this saviour suggested to the army and intimated a different direction to them. Giving this man the benefit of the doubt, the troops turned away from the shed where we were in. The night became dark again and they trudged off in another direction to houses further down the lane and away from us. Kingsley's brother-in-law had saved our lives. No sooner had the troops moved further on in the area to continue their search, than Kingsley's family came rushing into the shed. As the troops proceeded along their path in one direction, Kingsley's brother-in-law shuffled us out the opposite way. Everyone was in a flurry trying to find a place for us to hide in case the troops should return. But where to hide us? We couldn't go to the doctor's house; the army was encamped there. The only realistic possibility of escaping the troop round up, everybody concurred, was to take cover in the paddy field a few yards across the lane. As soon as the suggestion was made Kingsley moved off ahead of us to a coconut plantation where his grandfather was waiting. Much courage was required for this tall old man - an easy target silhouetted against the silvery night amongst the palmyrah trees to watch out for the army and lead us to the bank of the lane. Troops were patrolling the circle of lanes surrounding the paddy field we were heading for. Had they seen this lone figure in the dark they would certainly have had no compunction in shooting him dead. We hesitated wondering if a patrol would intercept us or spot us when we crossed. We were conscious that our lives hinged on us traversing this lane. With the instinct to survive propelling us forward, we stepped out, one by one, and crossed over, up onto the thorny scrubby undergrowth on the banks of the field and into obscurity amidst the stems of newly sprouted rice.

As we stumbled deeper into the paddy field Bala lost his footing, slipping into the ankle deep, larvae infested stagnant water, black mud squelching over his feet. Sitting on the embankment,

recovering from this sudden loss of gravity, he jumped up in alarm when a water snake slipped round his legs and slithered off. While we battled the snakes and mosquitoes on one side we ducked for cover at an unexpected flash of a light. One after the other, torches lit up the people's homes as the troops occupied their premises and proceeded to search for us. This routine was acted out for hours in the thickness of the night while we sat on an embankment of the field and watched in irony, the conduct of a search for us. We couldn't do anything but wait. Bala pointed out a grey old building at the far end of the paddy field and said, "This is the famous Vigneswara College in Karaveddy".

The fading of the dark and shades of daylight on the horizon nudged us away from the present into thinking of our next move. Daylight and rice fields would be no protection when helicopters reconnoitred the area. Kingsley decided to return to his home for an assessment of the situation. According to his experience, the troops would have returned to their camp after completing their search operations. But intermittent mumbling sounds from different directions obliged me to disagree. Troops, I believed, were still in the area.

Daylight compelled Bala and I to take cover under thorny bushes on the edge of the rice field while waiting for Kingsley to return. It was with quiet relief that we saw him coming towards us sometime later. He confirmed our suspicions that the troops had occupied the doctor's house throughout the night waiting to nab us if we had returned there. We speculated that they vacated the house expecting to lure us back there and then to swiftly round up the building again and capture us. But there was no sign of troops in the area at the moment, according to his assessment. He considered it safe to leave the rice field to return to his house and think about where to go to next.

Tired and hungry we hoped we could snatch a short snooze and something to eat before we dealt with the serious issue of our next step in the struggle to survive. We temporarily mentally turned off the immediate urgency and dozed on the bed in the vacant shed again. Kingsley's sister brought us the most delicious cup of piping hot sweet black tea I have ever tasted in my life. The odd snore from Bala indicated that he was spilling over from dozing into sleeping. I too was also about to abandon my concern for our safety and succumb to the temptation to sleep when that dreaded word floated through the air again. 'Army'. I pulled myself away from the doze I was in and got up and peered through the window. To my utter dismay people were running from one direction to the other. It was obvious something serious was happening. While I woke Bala and told him the army was in the area, Kingsley came running and hurried us to move out because the troops were just near the doctor's house. The area was being rounded up again.

On the Run

A villager quickly volunteered his bike to Kingsley and Bala climbed on ready to move out, when Chandran, another LTTE cadre and friend of Kingsley's from the area, raced up from out of nowhere, and told me to get on. We could see khaki moving down the lane at a distance.

In an expression of concern one of the flustered village ladies rushed over and in a bid to hide my colour and identity, quickly wrapped a dark sheet around my head. Kingsley's remarkably composed sister, anticipating a path out of the encirclement we were caught up in, seized the initiative and hastily proceeded ahead of us to the main road. The people in the village were in a panic, obviously disturbed by the heavy concentration of troops in the area. Kingsley's sister peered down the main road and identified a woman she knew. Unhesitatingly responding to the request of her friend and intuitively comprehending a crisis was at hand, this woman surveyed the road, and, ensuring that it was free from Indian troops, indicated to us to advance. She in turn waved to another woman, and when the area was all clear, she beckoned us to come. And so this spontaneous relay of initiative by these courageous women saved us from capture as they directed us out of the crucial first circle of an extensive and sweeping three ringed army round up of the area. We traversed the network of troops and, rather fortuitously, drew our escapade to a halt at a Hindu temple in Kilavi Thoddam, Karaveddy.

As we sat on the cool, spotlessly clean cement floor of the temple 'maddam' we felt we had come to the end of the road. All our safe houses had been raided by the troops and Kingsley was not overly familiar with this area of Vadamarachchi. On a hunch both Kingsley and Chandran rode off to talk to a family whom they considered to be generally supportive people. They hoped that this family would allow us to stay with them for the moment until we collected our thoughts and worked out a solution for the dire straits we were in. They left us with instructions to wait at the temple for their return. Soon after they had disappeared into the maze of lanes, the curious local people slowly came out of their houses and started to gather at the temple. Before too long a crowd was standing and looking at us. A potentially dangerous situation was rapidly emerging. The Indians were encamped at a major military establishment just a few miles down the road. If an army vehicle had passed the temple or a foot patrol strolled along, the crowd would have certainly attracted their attention and brought the army to the scene. But, at this moment, with nowhere to go and nowhere to hide, exposed, as we were, I turned to Bala and commented that our lives were totally in the hands of the people. Had there been an informant or anybody opposed to us, it would have taken them no more than a few minutes to inform the military authorities of our presence at the temple. No sooner had I commented this view to Bala, when a middle aged gentleman, acting on a sudden flash of insight, realised the danger posed to us by the growing crowd, stepped forward and quietly and politely asked the crowd to disperse. The people also, as if sudden awareness had dawned, immediately grasped the situation and they rapidly disappeared clearly not wishing to put us in danger. Subsequently, many peering eyes could be seen from behind the windows and over the fences.

We were offered a place to stay for a day at the house of the grandmother of one of our cadres. This old lady was warm and kind hearted. Characteristically of her age and culture, she responded with great humanity and empathy when she heard that we had been subjected to a hunt by the Indians and had not eaten for two days and were dead tired. She showed us to the well and allowed us to leisurely wash off the mud and dirt from the previous night in the paddy field while she, manifesting her long years of cooking experience, took the time to prepare one of her tastiest meals for us. Having relished this deliciously cooked meal, we slept undisturbed,

till late evening. Around nightfall a friend of Bala's rushed into the house to inform us that he thought the army had information about our whereabouts. He thought we should immediately move from where we were staying. And we trudged the lanes to wherever we could find a place (we had considered sleeping in the paddy fields again if we couldn't find a house to stay in). The people informed us that an army patrol had passed the area just a few minutes ahead of us. In fact we could see their boot marks in the sand. Since it was almost dark and we knew the troops had started their night rounds, we ducked into a dilapidated house and there we waited. Kandiah, who had rejoined us, suddenly disappeared into the darkness. We waited in trepidation for him to return and, as it became late, we speculated that he too must have been caught by the patrolling troops. If that were so, we thought, there was every prospect of us being rounded up in the night. We were prepared to accept this stroke of bad luck when Kandiah came quietly through the door. In his hand he was carrying a large cane shopping basket, full of food. Kandiah had gone to a friend's place and organised a meal for us. And again I was to be taken aback by the generosity and concern of the people.

We took my fluorescent torch and stood it in the middle of the floor so we could see what was in the basket. As I carefully took out the dishes of food it became obvious that a thoughtful and caring woman had been involved in the preparation of the meal. And then, from the bottom of a basket I pulled out what I thought was a stone. I took it out and held it in the palm of my hand and looked at it, puzzled. To my great surprise I saw it was a small piece of charcoal. I couldn't understand why this obviously neat and caring woman had included a small piece of charcoal with the food. Charcoal (or 'kari' in Tamil), according to the local belief system, I was told, is a protective agent that has the power to ward off evil spirits that accompany food parcels if they are taken out of the house in the night. It was not the superstitious belief that interested me, but the care and concern of the person who thought we must be protected from evil. It was reassuring to know there was a woman somewhere in that village in the darkness, who was concerned for our plight on that particular fateful night.

It was widely known in the area that we were being hunted like animals and in extreme difficulty. Anybody who took us into their house was exposing himself or herself to exceptional danger. Nevertheless, the potential of the human spirit is sometimes unfathomable and manifests in magnanimous and magnificent ways at unforeseen times. So we were both deeply grateful and concerned when we were taken into the home of a retired police officer and his two daughters in their early twenties. We were grateful that these people offered us a place to stay, and concerned for the safety of the two daughters if the army came to know of our whereabouts. I was determined that my presence in the house would not expose these girls to danger and I subsequently stayed inside our room during the day and washed and so forth only at night. Although there was no more danger than usual at this house, Bala and I both knew that we were feeling the strain of the circumstances. We could not sleep peacefully. Our frequent visits to pass urine in the night was a reliable indicator of the tension and strain we were under. By the barking of dogs we knew the army was patrolling the lanes surrounding our house as we tried to sleep.

Two uneventful days passed under the watchful care of these generous and caring young women.

It would be risky for everyone if we were to stay at the house any longer. But this family remained unconcerned about the danger to them and reassured us that we were welcome to stay as long as was necessary. Fortunately our queries about our next abode were put to rest when Soosai came to see us. He had been well informed of the mounting crisis we were coping with and now that the weather and sea conditions had improved, arrangements were underway for us to leave Vadamarachchi. This news from Soosai brought a smile to our faces and he reassured us he would be back with the final arrangements the next day. In the meantime, the news broadcast the death of the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Mr. M.G. Ramachandran on 23rd December 1987. A day of national mourning and cease-fire was announced. As a token of respect to the Chief Minister the IPKF troops would be confined to barracks. It seemed a quirk of fate that this grand old man who over our years in Tamil Nadu had been instrumental in the growth and development of the organisation and had sponsored medical care for Bala in Chennai, should now, even in death, play such a vital role in giving us life.

Soosai told us to prepare for the final leg of our saga. On the afternoon of 24th December, two cadres on bikes came and collected us for the long ride from one corner of Vadamarachchi to a waiting boat at Thikkam, on the North coast. I was at a loss for words to express my gratitude and appreciation to these exceptional young women and their father when it came time to say good bye. They knew that we deeply wished that no harm should come their way after we had gone; and it never did. The laws of righteousness had prevailed. The Indians never came to know of our sanctuary in these good people's home. With big smiles all around we wished each other well and off we cycled. Free from the presence of the patrolling troops for a day, the people gathered and chatted at the front gates of their houses and, as I passed them by balancing precariously on the bar of the cycle hearty waves bid me farewell.

The Final Challenge

Miraculously, we had survived a sustained and concerted manhunt by a ruthless and powerful force. Surely there couldn't be any circumstances more perilous and life threatening than those that we had confronted and triumphed over. The worst was behind us, I thought. The forthcoming sea journey across the Palk Strait to Tamil Nadu, although not a luxury cruise, would be a minor episode in comparison with the events of the past few months. Once we were at sea and on our way to India we would be just a few hours away from safety, I anticipated. But oh how wrong I was. Our struggle to survive on land had now been taken to the sea and our journey was to manifest its own set of problems and hazards. The coming journey was to be as perilous as those that we had confronted and overcome.

On the coast at Thikkam we were reunited with some of our old friends who were also on the run, waiting to embark on the sea journey with us. Soosai was there too, attending to the final arrangements before we set off. Anxious to mentally prepare myself before we cast off into the sea, I enquired from Soosai just how many hours he thought it would take for us to reach the shores of Tamil Nadu. "Four hours," he promptly replied. "Four hours. Well its far longer

than the one hour or so it took for us to come to Jaffna from India, but I'll manage this last hurdle," I quietly thought to myself. But when we moved down to the white sands in the final moments before our departure a feeling of dread engulfed me. Even though there had been a slight break in the monsoon rains, the cold winds had whipped up the sea and the crossing was going to be both challenging and daunting. As I stood looking out over the turbulent waters into the distance ahead of me, I pushed to the back of my mind any scepticism or fears I had about plunging into the journey. Having managed and survived the perils of the past months, I convinced myself that the sea was just another obstacle to overcome. But my confidence received a jolt when I saw the boat that was to take us across this wild ocean plain. It was just a small fibreglass dingy, with two eight horsepower engines attached to the stern. How, I wondered in amazement, is this going to stand up to the enormous challenge posed by this untamed sea? I had no choice but to trust Soosai's experience and skill. I felt sure he would not send us out on a trail to destruction. After all, so many of our cadres had used the same boat and survived the crossing. Many fishermen had also faced the gigantic might of these natural forces in boats like this. I had to reassure myself that should we triumph in this battle with nature and succeed in getting to India, where we could at least disappear amongst the teeming millions and stand a chance of surviving. But behind us, on the Jaffna land mass, there was certain death. A small chance was better than none and so, underplaying the dangers that lay ahead, I put our bags in the boat and prepared to set off.

The dark was quickly settling on the horizon we were heading towards and the odd black cloud hovering in the sky added to the generally grey atmosphere. A sense of urgency started to set in as time went on and we hadn't departed. Our cadres wanted to be away from the scene before the troops ventured out for the night. So we clambered into the boat and found somewhere to sit on the boat floor. Soon afterwards, Soosai and dozens of cadres pushed us through the breaking waves, out into the whims of the great ocean. The engines were started and we seemed to be on our way. But as we moved away from the coast, I was suddenly overcome by a deep sense of guilt and emotion. The constant waves of crisis we had been subjected to brought me into relationships with remarkable people who had demonstrated the best in humanity. Many people drew from deep inside themselves to make the sacrifices and to take the risks they did for us and I felt a deep bond with them. So when I saw the coastline fading from view I truly felt I was abandoning our trusted friends to an uncertain future. For many years I had waited to join the people in their struggle and I had, even in those few months in Jaffna, shared some of the oppression and trauma of the society and I was sad to have to leave them to their plight. Of course there was a sense of relief also that the pressure of the hunt had been lifted. But my sense of relief proved to be premature and totally misplaced.

Having successfully traversed the breaking coastal waves, we tried to come to terms with the rolling, deep, grey ocean surrounding us. But just a few miles out and our attention shifted to an urgent problem. It became apparent that one of our motors was not functioning smoothly. It coughed and spluttered, and then it would be okay for a short distance, then spluttered again. Our 'otti' (boat drivers) were concerned as to whether the motor would make the distance to India, and there was some murmuring that we might have to return to shore. In

their experience, it would be foolish and dangerous to continue a journey with only one motor functioning reliably. It was an accepted practice of the boat drivers not to venture out into the deep ocean without two motors, the logic being that if one engine broke down mid way, there was always the second one to rely on. Being just a few miles out it was too soon in the journey to risk the long distance ahead with only one motor functioning. We could easily be stranded in the middle of the ocean if it failed. The idea was frightening. They tinkered with the motor and it chugged a few yards, but they were not at all satisfied. Now we were confronted with a huge dilemma and we looked at each other wondering what they would decide to do. We were stuck -literally - between the devil and the deep blue sea. Ahead of us were unknown dangers and behind us were the known perils. We dreaded the idea of having to turn back. Through communication with our cadres on shore we had been informed that the Indian troops were in the area. Without knowing exactly where they were, it would be extremely dangerous to land and wait around while attempts were made to repair or replace the engine. We ran the risk of falling straight into their hands. But in reality there was no choice: we would have to go back to the shore. Our hearts sank as the boat slowly turned and headed for land again. We knew we were all in danger again and had not yet escaped the hunt by the Indians. The 'otti' communicated the engine problem to our cadres waiting under cover on shore. They in turn further briefed our 'otti' on troop movements. A few kilometres out at sea the motors were shut down and we wondered what was to happen next.

The night had settled and our boat was adrift in that choppy coastal sea. Then, to our astonishment, one of the 'otti's slipped into the rough water. I presumed he planned to swim ashore, reconnoitre the beach for troop movements and seek assistance to repair the motor, but to my utter astonishment this courageous young man did just the opposite. Riding and treading the waves he struggled to unfasten the non-functioning outboard motor, took the full weight of the engine on his shoulder and side-stroked his way to the beach. He planned to find a replacement motor from one of the many fishermen in the village, and, to avoid us having to make a dangerous landing on the beach, swim back with it and fit it to the boat. I couldn't even begin to imagine how this young man was going to pull off such a feat. It was dark, the winter water must have been cold for him and the Indian army was somewhere nearby on the beach. Nevertheless, totally disregarding the danger to himself, he relentlessly carried on executing the plan. And while he struggled with the swell in the water, we waited in the sea for him to return. Up and down like a journey through rolling hills our small boat moved with the mood of the sea. I heaved my stomach into the water. But it was only when vehicle lights moving along the coastal road grew brighter and more distinct, did we realise that the tidal currents were dragging the sea as well as our boat inexorably towards the coast and possibly into the hands of the Indian troops. For fear of alerting the convoys of troops travelling along the coastal road, we couldn't start the remaining motor and move out deeper into the sea. Nor could we control the tidal currents. Time dragged on as we waited in desperation for the outcome of the race between the tide pulling us towards the Indian army on one side, and the return of our boat driver with a new motor, on the other. We seemed to be doomed as we drifted within hundreds of yards of the shore. We all remained quiet to avoid attracting any attention in our direction. Then, through the darkness a light flashed on and

off. It was the signal from the 'otti' on shore indicating he had a new motor and was about to return to the boat. Our hopes lifted and a short time later we saw a head bobbing up and down amidst the waves. In all my experiences with the Tamil freedom struggle, the vision of this young man struggling through the water towards our boat with the new motor on his shoulder demonstrated one of the finest examples of the human spirit for courage, sacrifice and determination. It was extraordinary to witness this young man pitted against the power of the sea, and to see him emerge triumphant. With two engines firing smoothly we headed off. News from the shore told us the troops had descended on the beach at Thikkam just a few minutes after our departure. We had beaten them again. Apparently the troops had been tipped off that a white woman had been seen during the day making her way to the coastal area.

We headed out into the sea knowing that we couldn't turn back again. It was now a do or die situation. "Just a few more hours," I kept telling my self, "hang on girl, just a few more hours". But no sooner had we solved the problem of the motor and were well out into the sea when another, equally dangerous problem confronted us. Our 'otti' travelled without maps or surveillance equipment. They depended for their direction on the position of the stars and their years of experience had taught them the difference between Sri Lankan and Indian ships. So when we all saw this dark menacing image growing on the horizon we realised were heading straight towards an Indian warship. For God's sake, it was just an unbelievable coincidence for the Indian Navy to be taking up the hunt in the sea from where the troops had left off on the land. We made a slight change of course and that took us out of reach of the ship's radar surveillance. And, as this dark, faceless sea monster melted into the night, we knew we had eluded its dangerous reaches. But there was no time to relish our small victory. Having avoided one ship we now saw a Sri Lankan Navy patrol boat. Its presence created panic as we came closer to it. Fortune was with us as the patrol crew failed to spot us in the dark and passed us by. With a feeling that the worst was over, we pushed on into the Palk Strait waters.

As distance gathered behind us, darkness engulfed us and the cold stole our warmth. Seas whipped up by cold winds, heaved and rolled, pushing us in and out of deep troughs. Bulging black clouds hung in the sky, growing heavier all the time. Black night stretched forever, beyond what the eye could see. Not one ray of light lit up any hope for us. Surely we had passed four hours in this eternity. "How far have we got to go", I asked impatiently, "Not far Auntie", our 'otti' lied. But the tumultuous sea was only one of our battles. Despair was to strike again when one motor spluttered, succumbing to the exhaustion of its task. Would the one remaining eight horsepower engine triumph over what appeared to be a task of Sisyphean proportions. Surely, after all we had survived in Vadamarachchi, we were not destined to die in the lonely darkness, in the middle of an ocean. Only the 'otti' read the stars and knew which direction we were in and how far we had to go before we reached land again. Great waves swelled up before us and broke over our boat, collecting in pools beneath us. We grabbed anything that was available and frantically scooped out the rising water to relieve the boat of extra weight. This daunting and desperate situation turned into an utter nightmare when we saw one engine suddenly slip off the stern and into the water and our boat came to a halt.

Was it the functioning engine or was it the one that had broken down that had gone over the edge? We all held our breath and waited while our 'otti' started the surviving motor. It was obvious which one had taken a dive. Relieved, we set off again in our challenge with the sea. By this time we had been battling with the ocean and the weather for several hours and exposure became our next deadly foe.

None of us was specifically prepared for this lengthy sea journey. We all wore our thin cotton clothes and rubber flip-flops on our feet; suitable for the heat in Jaffna but totally inappropriate for the environment and weather we were exposed to. And as the night cold paralleled the deepening ocean we realised how foolish we had been. The sea was merciless and persistent, swelling up before our eyes and threatening to swallow us at any moment. By this time we had been at sea for many hours. Breaking waves battered our little dinghy and the seawater drenched us to the skin. The gusty wind blowing over our wet clothes made the cold unbearable. Sitting at the side of the boat, I bore the brunt of the breaking waves and wind. Indeed, I was so cold, my teeth chattered uncontrollably and I became petrified at my position unable to even let go the side of the boat. But my grasp also symbolised my hanging on to life. In that position I knew I was alive and I feared if I let go I would lose what ever I had remaining in the way of warmth and strength. The consciousness of my inability to control my chattering teeth also told me I was still alive. Bala was cold and shivering. Wet and nauseous, we thought the journey would never end. Time became eternity. We had been on the ocean for more than four hours, surely our journey was nearly over. "Half an hour. Half an hour", the 'otti' kept lying to me. All I could think of was getting off this angry sea and out of the freezing cold. One of the 'otti' urged me on by pointing out the first glimmer of light on the horizon. In that distance ahead were the lights from the coastal villages of Tamil Nadu revealing themselves to us like a god to the non-believers. Looking deceptively close, we thought it would be only a matter of minutes before we got off the sea and back to warmth. But 'thambi' didn't tell me that those lights were still hours away. Our inexperience in sea travel and poor judgement of distance at sea totally misled us and as time went on we realised it would be hours and more freezing cold before we would rendezvous with that alluring beacon in the night. Nevertheless, that glow of potential warmth had the life sustaining effect of rekindling hope in us.

As we approached the coast we were aware that we would have to be on guard and watch for Indian naval and coast guard boats. But the threat posed by these patrols paled in comparison with the promise of this radiant warmth in front of us. I was freezing and could barely move my head to look around for patrol boats. It was imperative for us also to time our arrival just before daylight. Any time after that we could easily be spotted by patrolling boats and taken into custody.

The two 'otti' were familiar enough with these waters to be able to cautiously navigate us in directions they knew the coast guard and customs patrols were least likely to be in the early morning. Fortunately, we did not see any boats on this side of the sea. Nevertheless, not prepared to leave things to chance, we all rallied and were on the lookout for any possible threat that could cruelly intercede to obstruct our final stretch of the journey. A few drops of rain sent alarm bells ringing. The black clouds were now a real threat and we all hoped the

rain would hold off for our final dash for dry land. We rode the breaking waves to shallow coastal water. Stiffened by cold, we pulled ourselves out of the boat and stepped into the ankle deep mud that we couldn't see beneath the water. And the heavens opened and the rain poured down. Drenched to the skin and bogged down in sticky mud we trudged away from our little saviour. But while we survived, the courageous little boat did not. A huge wave reared up behind us, tossing the dingy into the swell and turning it upside down. It was an unceremonious end to our unforgettable ten-hour sea saga, and the beginning of a new stage in our underground fugitive existence.

Underground In India

In what amounted to be a major paradox, we finally sought and found refuge in India. Furthermore, while the Indian army prosecuted the war against the LTTE in the Tamil homeland, many LTTE cadres continued to live in Tamil Nadu. Nevertheless, their presence in Tamil Nadu was in stark contrast to the years when the LTTE enjoyed the patronage of Tamil Nadu politicians and the support of the popular masses. Now they lived under constant surveillance by police and intelligence agencies and the threat of arrest and detention hung over their heads. All our cadres were cautious and alert expecting the authorities to pounce on them and arrest them and keep them in custody, which they did, in a statewide roundup of LTTE cadres in August 1988. But in our view, the war with the Indian state was one matter; our regard for the people of Tamil Nadu and India remained unaffected by the events in the homeland.

On our arrival in Vetharniyam we were taken to supporters' houses where the people protected us from the local police and customs officers. But since Vetharniyam was a relatively small town, these people's houses were well known to the local authorities and the risk of us being detected was extremely high. So we were advised to move. In view of Bala being a known figure in Tamil Nadu and my colour making us an easily identifiable couple, we opted to leave the state for an underground life in Bangalore in Karanataka state where Bala was not well known. So, following a brief period at a safe house in Tiruchi we moved to Bangalore where we rented a house in Jayanagar.

Soon after we established ourselves in Bangalore, more underground LTTE cadres in Tamil Nadu decided to shift to Bangalore and join us. In the initial days in Bangalore I made a determined effort to avoid drawing the attention of the state authorities to us. I confined most of my activities to the house. But as time went on this situation became unbearable: I was a virtual prisoner in the house and it stretched my patience and tolerance to the limit. Bala and I decided to throw caution to the wind and started to move around the city, going shopping and to parks etc. We followed events in both Tamil Eelam and India carefully, always hoping that perhaps there would be a cease-fire and an end to the war and we could return to Jaffna. But it wasn't to be. With no prospect of an end to the war in the near future, Mr. Pirabakaran sent a message to Bala urging us to leave India for London where we could inform the Tamil diaspora of the political and military events and developments in the LTTE war with India.

And so with the decision made for us to leave India, we were wondering how to leave the country without being intercepted by the various Indian intelligence agencies. The only path for us to leave the country was through the Chennai international airport. With a view of working out arrangements to leave India without being arrested at the departure terminal, we returned to Chennai in the middle of the night and stayed with a friend.

Kittu was under house arrest in Chennai. Several police officers stood guard over his residence twenty-four hours of the day. But we had to meet our old friend and the man in charge of politics in Tamil Nadu before we left for London. Kittu was living upstairs in a two story house. While he lived upstairs the police guards ‘lived’ on the ground floor. Kittu was informed of our wish to see him. As a man of innovative ideas, Kittu devised a devious scheme to distract the attention of the police officers on guard. He hired a couple of popular Tamil films and arranged a special video film show on that particular night as entertainment for the policemen. While all the police personnel, including the one at the gate, remained glued with hypnotic delight to a Tamil film, we climbed through the barbed wire fence and slipped into the top floor through the stairs behind the house. We achieved our objective of meeting Kittu without being snared by the Tamil Nadu police. We also met an old Indian friend, a senior Intelligence Bureau officer well known to Bala during friendly days with India. Bala liked and respected this cultured gentleman. On his suggestions we confined our movements in Chennai in those crucial last days to certain areas and to a minimum to avoid being tracked down by the Tamil Nadu ‘Q’ Branch officers. We informed him of our plan to leave India and he conveniently arranged to be at the ticket checking in desk and at the immigration point. Both our visiting visas had expired many years earlier. We arrived at the ticket counter as unobtrusively as possible and at the exact check in time. We were booked in under a different name and were rather disconcerted when the ticket clerk handed back our tickets with a “Have a good journey, Mr. Balasingham”. Having checked in, all that remained was the immigration point. We handed our passports to a rather conscientious immigration officer, who scrutinised our passports and looked sternly at us and then, to our relief, looked at a figure standing in the background. With a nod from this man the officer promptly closed our passports and briskly handed them to us as he waved us through. The determining figure in the shadows was our good friend, the Tamil I.B officer. A short time later we were in the air, bound for London. Our lives had completed a full circle.

6 Premadasa - LTTE Talks

There is nothing like war to manifest ironies. History too, has its quirks. So one shouldn't be surprised to discover that having escaped from the island of Sri Lanka we had now returned, but this time under very different circumstances. Our base was not Tamil Eelam, but the Sinhala South. Nor were we being hunted in lanes and fields, but enjoying the comforts of a five star hotel in Colombo. We were not dealing with an ally who had become an enemy, but an enemy who had become an ally. Furthermore, we were not on a mission of war, but one of peace. These were my reflections on May 3rd 1989 as we flew in a Sri Lankan Air Force Bell helicopter on our mission to Vanni to airlift out LTTE delegates for their participation in peace talks in Colombo. We were flying from Colombo into the airspace of the Indian occupied territory of Tamil Eelam. A select team of journalists from Colombo were flying alongside us in another helicopter.

Two giant MI24 helicopters gunships of the Indian airforce intercepted our craft and followed at a distance. It was an affront by the Indians to impose themselves on our flight for we knew that the Sri Lankan Air Force did not seek India's permission for this mission. Their commanders believed that they had sovereign rights to fly over their territory and did not require Indian permission to enter the Tamil Eelam air space. Not surprisingly, the Sri Lankans were taken aback at the sudden and unexpected threat posed by the heavily armed Indian helicopters. Nevertheless, disregarding this hostile intrusion, the Sri Lankan pilots remained calm and stayed on course, flying towards their designated destination while scrutinising a map of Vanni.

In our view, this deliberate tagging of our flight constituted an unfriendly act by the Indians, signalling that they viewed the nascent relationship between the LTTE and the Premadasa government with some displeasure and scepticism. The action sent a message to Mr. Premadasa and the LTTE that, while publicly she welcomed the opening up of a dialogue between the two parties in this ethnic conflict, privately India was peeved and would assert herself as a superpower in the region and also would try to remain a major player in the turbulent politics of Sri Lanka. The Indian helicopters, their unmistakable message delivered, disappeared into the blue haze. We proceeded with our project, flying over the sun baked paddy fields and hamlets of thatched mud huts, towards our destination in the jungles of Nedernkerni. Seen from the sky, the dense jungle green interspersed with hues from swampy lakes and marshy lands and shades from open fields all added up to an enormous patchwork quilt. And somewhere beneath the thick green canopy, dug in deep, were hundreds of our guerrilla cadres, watching as our helicopters circled overhead. We had entered the pick up area.

Before our departure from Colombo, it had been arranged with the Sri Lankan military establishment that our cadres should mark a huge white cross in a clearing in the jungle to indicate to the helicopter pilots their whereabouts and a safe landing zone. But as the helicopters circled repeatedly, a glimpse of the white cross remained elusive. Flying from one area to the next the helicopter gulped fuel as we scanned the jungle below for a sign of the landing zone. As the search went on, our excitement at the prospect of meeting our cadres again waned, as we wondered if the fuel would hold out for us to cover the vast area of jungle stretching to the horizon. Had the pilot got his directions wrong or was it our cadres who had made a mistake? It didn't really matter; what concerned us most was to locate the landing zone as quickly as possible, while we had the fuel to do so. Then, just as thoughts of abandoning the mission entered into the pilot's considerations, we saw a red spot in the distance. As the Bell helicopter chugged closer to the spot, it transformed into a young man frantically waving a red flag in a bid to attract our attention. Gradually, a white cross became evident through the green. It had to be our cadres. Bala picked up the short range walkie-talkie, dialled in the code number and smiled when he heard, "Hello Bala Anna, we receive you".

As the two helicopters slowly descended, the faces of our cadres became discernible through the trees and bushes of the thick jungle skirting the open landing field. A quick glance around reminded us that we were still at war with both India and Sri Lanka. Hundreds of heavily armed cadres had been deployed to defend the area in the event of a sudden military operation by the Indian army. The cautious LTTE cadres, satisfied that the passengers in the helicopters were bona fide and not a ruse to draw them out into a hail of gunfire, rushed forward from their jungle cover carrying trays of cakes and biscuits for their guests. Extending the legendary Tamil hospitality even in the midst of a remote jungle, the cadres served the journalists and pilots with food followed by soft drinks and 'elani' (young coconut juice) for refreshment. The cadres were curious also. After all, they had been in their jungle hideout for eighteen months and this was their first friendly visit during that period. But most of the curiosity focused on the Sri Lankan helicopters and their pilots. It was quite an irony for the craft to be carrying out a non-hostile mission over Tamil territory. The infamous Bells had become synonymous with terror and death amongst the Tamil people and were viewed with caution. Fifty calibre machine guns and rocket pods fixed to the helicopter had killed and maimed countless numbers of Tamils from the air and had reduced hundreds of buildings to rubble. Ironical also, was the sight of Sri Lankan pilots and LTTE cadres reticently greeting each other, quite a contrast to their recent history of mutual exchanges of fire in a bid to kill each other.

Mr. Yogaratnam Yogi, and Mr. Paramu Murthy senior cadres from the political section of the LTTE appointed to expand the Tigers' negotiating team and to assist Bala - as well as their bodyguards and Mr. Jude, the communication man, emerged from the jungle dressed in camouflage uniforms: they were the people for whom this entire expedition had been undertaken.

With greetings conveyed and photos snapped, the slightly nervous pilots were anxious to get their idling helicopters back into the air and over more friendly territory before the fuel supply dwindled. So within half an hour of our landing in Nederkerni, Yogi and Murthy were on their

way to Colombo, the capital of the Sinhala lion, to open a new and extraordinary chapter in the history of the brutal conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lanka state. Two hours later, the helicopters landed on the grounds of the Colombo Airforce headquarters in the centre of the capital. After talking to the media personnel in the Airforce grounds, we were taken to a pre-arranged venue (Colombo Hilton Hotel) with tight security arranged by the Special Task Force (STF), to prepare for the historic first negotiations between the LTTE and the Premadasa regime.

Unrest in the North and South

After our miraculous escape from Jaffna and our return to the west, Bala and I travelled to many countries. There we met the Tamil diaspora and various government and non-government officials and explained the problems caused by Indian intervention and the tragic events, which culminated in the unanticipated outbreak of hostilities between the LTTE and the Indian 'peacekeeping force'. It was during this propaganda tour abroad that the situation in Sri Lanka became grim and the island sank deeper into a quagmire of escalating violence and political instability. The intervention of India in the ethnic conflict and the induction of the Indian army into the island were the causative factor for the Tamil resistance campaign in the Northeast and the open rebellion by the disgruntled youth in the South. Totally underestimating the depth of nationalist sentiments and the political consciousness of the peoples of the two nations, the induction of the Indian army as a 'peacekeeping force', under the terms of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, proved to be one of the gravest political, diplomatic and military blunders made by Rajiv Gandhi's administration. Ironically, the Indian troops who came to the island as a peace keeping force turned out to be the very catalyst of brutal violence in the North as well as in the South transforming its original character from a peace force into one of oppression and violence. On two fronts, the North and the South, disparate political and military struggles registered their opposition to Indian intervention thus, in the internal affairs of both the Tamils and the Sinhalese.

Disregarding the aspirations of the Tamil people, the Sri Lanka government, in collaboration with the Indian military forces, went ahead with the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, by attempting to establish a Provincial Council for the civil administration of the Northeast. Provincial Council elections of 19th November 1988, held under conditions of war, fear, and intimidation orchestrated and supervised by the Indian military administration, made a mockery of the democratic process. Vote rigging, ballot box stuffing and other malpractices accounted for the electoral victory and assumption to power of the now Indian sponsored Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) in the Northeast. The installation of a pro-Indian Tamil political party to administer the Northeastern Provincial Council in the Tamil areas with a puppet politician at its helm, failed to diffuse scepticism but generated anger and criticism of India amongst the Tamil people.

The EPRLF Provincial administration functioned as a political extension of the Indian military occupation of the Tamil homeland. It primarily served Indian interests. It was instituted as a smokescreen to conceal the military repression and persecution by the IPKF and to legitimise the now infamous Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. The armed EPRLF cadres functioned as mercenaries with the Indian army and collaborated with its campaign to crush the LTTE and to silence criticism of their regime. Their treacherous politics earned the EPRLF the resentment and hatred of the people. Ultimately, EPRLF operated as death squads for the Indian army of occupation. Critics and dissidents suddenly disappeared, never to be heard of again and prominent LTTE supporters were found murdered in their homes or on the streets. This reign of terror fuelled popular support for the LTTE's resistance campaign against Indian military occupation and its puppet political regime. Alienated from the Tamil people, deserted by the Sri Lanka government, and in conflict with the LTTE, the Northeast Provincial administration of Varatharaja Perumal could not function amongst the masses. Instead, it confined itself within a square mile territory in the Trincomalee town under the protective cover of the Indian occupation army.

The unprecedented social and political chaos that tore the island apart during this period was the political legacy of twelve years of United National Party (UNP) rule which J.R. Jayawardene handed over to his successor, Mr. Ranasinghe Premadasa. When Mr. Premadasa was elected as the second Executive President of Sri Lanka on the 20th December 1988, he found himself in an extraordinary conjuncture, confronting island-wide turbulence, unrest and unparalleled violence. In the Northeast, the Indo-LTTE war continued unabated. The IPKF, consisting of more than one hundred thousand troops, was struggling to contain dedicated LTTE guerrillas operating amidst a supportive populace. In Southern Sri Lanka there was insurrectionary violence - armed rebellion by the Janatha Vimukthi Perumuna (People's Liberation Front) - against the state. Popularly known as the JVP, the Marxist rebel organisation reemerged after being crushed in a revolt against Mrs. Srimavo Bandaranaike's regime in 1971- and brought chaos and anarchy to several Sinhala districts. By terrorising the public through murder and violence these 'Marxist revolutionaries' had 'liberated' several regions in the South and brought the Government's administrative machinery to a standstill. Thousands died in an orgy of gruesome violence. Political assassinations, lamp post killings, mass graves, tortured and mutilated dead bodies floating in rivers, funeral pyres of burning tyres littering the streets, and disappearances characterised the JVP's insurrectionary violence and the brutal counter insurgency campaign of the state security' forces. At its peak, hartals (strikes) called by the insurgents crippled civil society and severely disrupted public administration, grinding the society to a halt. Reprisals for non-compliance with insurgent demands were severe, striking terror into the hearts of the people. As the JVP violence spread, police stations were attacked and universities and colleges were closed down and the public transport system was paralysed. Except for the capital city, Colombo, most of the regional centres were seriously affected by the JVP insurrection. Adopting classical Maoist guerrilla model of encircling the city by taking over rural areas, the JVP posed an urgent and immediate threat to the newly assumed regime of Premadasa. Unlike in 1971, the JVP did not invoke the problem of class contradiction and proletarian revolution as the central theme of their armed insurrection against the capitalist

State. The cardinal issue this time was the Indian military occupation of Northeastern Sri Lanka. The bourgeois class of the UNP, in JVP's perception, had allowed the 'Indian imperialists' to occupy the 'sacred land of the Sinhala race'. The Sinhala masses, which have been historically suspicious of Indian intentions, were swayed by this ultra-nationalist propaganda. The JVP leadership also condemned the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord as a 'document of surrender' of Sri Lanka's sovereignty to an alien superpower. The 'red army' of the JVP was actually poised to invade the capital when Premadasa assumed power as the Head of State.

A shrewd and experienced politician, Mr. Premadasa grasped the underlying cause of the LTTE's war in the North and the JVP's insurrection in the South. He rightly concluded, that it was the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force, which had virtually taken control of all eight districts of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, including the strategically important harbour, Trincomalee, that triggered the dynamics of violence in the North as well as in the South. Premadasa feared that the Indian troops might stay on Sri Lankan soil indefinitely as the fighting against the LTTE had transformed into a war of attrition, a protracted low intensity conflict. He felt that neither the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord nor the Indian military presence had resolved the ethnic problem. It was the lack of vision and will on the part of the Sinhala political leadership, he thought, that led to foreign military intervention and occupation. His immediate concern was to expel the Indian troops from the country and invite the Northern and Southern rebels for peace talks and reconciliation.

While it can be said that Premadasa's origins brought him closer to the 'ordinary' man, it is nonetheless true that the 'ordinary' man in Premadasa embodied deep Sinhala Buddhist sentiments. And this was clearly evident in his choice of the Temple of the Tooth, the Dalada Maligawa, in Kandy, the heartland of Sinhala Buddhism, for his inauguration ceremony on 2nd January 1989. This historic Sinhala venue was at one and the same time an extension and an enunciation of his political objectives. His choice of the Temple of the Tooth for such an eminent day in his personal life signified his devotion to Buddhism and to the Buddhist heritage of giving primacy to religion over the matters of state. It was also a dramatic act of evocation of historically entrenched Sinhala nationalist sentiments. By taking the argument one step further, we can discern that Premadasa shared the popular feelings of resentment expressed island wide concerning the occupation of the Northeast by the Indian army. Political commentators would have noted that by opting for Kandy, with its history of resistance to foreign invasion, Premadasa was clearly signalling that he too resented and intended to remove the occupying Indian troops from the island. Indeed Premadasa's consistent opposition to the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and any political deal that would deepen Indian intervention in the island, was well known in political circles in Colombo.

Invitation to Peace Talks

Addressing the nation from Dalada Maligawa on January 2nd 1989, President Premadasa invited both the LTTE and the JVP for talks. Taking a swipe at India, he declared that the

ethnic issue was an internal matter and had to be resolved without the intervention of external forces. Furthermore, he vowed that he would not surrender an inch of Sri Lankan territory to the foreigners. Insofar as the LTTE leadership was concerned, the message was clear. They realised that the new President was taking a confrontationist course with India; a matter that had to be taken into serious consideration in view of the critical situation the LTTE was in. Bala - who was in London at that time - and Mr Pirabakaran, were in communication and I knew that Bala was favourably disposed to the idea of talking to the Premadasa regime. If the LTTE could get the IPKF out of the Tamil homeland with the collaboration of the new President it would be a remarkable achievement, Bala commented to me. We were waiting for further developments in Colombo before making a response. In the meantime, Mr. Premadasa lifted the Emergency and ordered the release of 1,800 hard core JVP cadres as a gesture of goodwill. These measures compelled the JVP to suspend their terror campaign in the South for a couple of months but they relaunched their insurrectionary war against Premadasa in full intensity after having mobilised and re-strengthened their ranks with the released cadres. Mr. Premadasa realised that his policy of appeasement towards the JVP would not work and that he had no alternative but to suppress them militarily. In his strategy to crush the JVP rebellion in the South - which was now posing a major threat to his rule he had to secure the withdrawal of the IPKF. To this end, he needed the support of the LTTE.

As I was to learn from the horse's mouth during our dialogue with him, Mr. Premadasa admired the LTTE for their determination, dedication, courage and sacrifice. He was fully aware of the objective conditions of Sinhala State repression that precipitated the armed liberation struggle of the Tigers. He felt that he could engage the LTTE in a positive dialogue and resolve the conflict through consultation, compromise and consensus, his famous three C's for conflict resolution. Having made a public announcement inviting the Tigers for talks, he desperately made attempts to contact the LTTE directly. The Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS) leaders, Mr. Balakumar and Mr. Pararajasingham, when queried by Mr. Premadasa as how to contact the LTTE, told him that Bala was available in London and that he was the only senior LTTE leader living outside Sri Lanka who had contact with the leadership in Vanni. Somehow or other, Mr. Premadasa managed to get our telephone number. Thereafter he phoned Bala regularly and established a friendly rapport with him. Bala told him that the leadership in Vanni was considering his call for peace talks and an appropriate decision would be made at a suitable time. He also told him that the LTTE would appreciate it if the President made a public commitment to getting the Indian troops out of the Tamil homeland. Thereafter the LTTE was waiting for Mr. Premadasa's response. On the 12th April 1989 Mr. Premadasa announced a unilateral cease-fire between the Sri Lankan armed forces and the LTTE in celebration of the Tamil-Sinhala New Year and called upon the IPKF to follow suit. Responding to Premadasa's move, the LTTE, in a hard hitting open letter to the Sri Lankan President rejected his offer of cease-fire arguing that 'until the Indian army of oppression leaves our land, there will be no such thing as a ceasefire'. The letter also criticised Premadasa for back tracking on his pre-election pledge to secure the withdrawal of the Indian army. Mr. Premadasa understood the message and the Tigers' resentment. Premadasa's nationalist and anti-Indian sentiments lent sympathy to the LTTE's armed resistance campaign against the Indian army

of occupation. He also realised that he had to make a public commitment on Indian troops withdrawal to appease the LTTE and to gain their trust in his administration. Accordingly, on April 13th 1989, addressing a temple function on the outskirts of Colombo, Mr. Premadasa made a public announcement demanding that the government of India should withdraw the IPKF completely from Sri Lanka in three months. On the same day, Mr. Ranjan Wijeratne, Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister issued a statement on behalf of the government inviting the LTTE for peace talks. Pleased with the developments, the LTTE leadership - through their headquarters in London sent a letter to the Sri Lankan President accepting the invitation for talks and requesting the Government to make necessary arrangements to facilitate these. The letter was followed up by quick confirmation by the leadership of the LTTE, appointing Bala as the accredited representative and chief negotiator. Following this turn of events, Bala and I made preparations to undertake a peace mission to Sri Lanka. We arrived in Colombo on April 26th 1989 and were accommodated at the Colombo Hilton. A Government delegation consisting of Mr. K HJ Wijayadasa, Secretary to the President, General Sepala Attygalle, Minister of State for Defence and Mr. Felix Dias Abeysinghe, a senior Foreign Ministry official paid a courtesy call in the evening. In a brief meeting, Mr. Wijayadasa conveyed to us the President's pleasure at the LTTE's acceptance to talks. We were told that the President would meet the LTTE delegation when other cadres were brought to Colombo. On the following day, Mr Sepala Attygalle and General Ranatunga visited us in the hotel to workout the date, venue and other modalities to bring the LTTE delegates from the Northern jungles. It was decided to give the Vanni mission media publicity and to take a team of selected journalists in the helicopters. The mission was to take place on the 3rd May 1989.

Meeting With Premadasa

Soon after our arrival at the hotel we were informed that a meeting with President Premadasa had been arranged for the following day, 4th May at 5 p.m. We decided to approach the meeting with a positive attitude, mainly concentrating on issues of mutual interest. We held the view that this could lead to constructive dialogue producing positive results. We were determined not to allow political contradictions to emerge in the process of the dialogue at this stage. Both sides had a lot at stake in ensuring the success of the talks. To achieve our objective, it was crucial that we should strike a rapport with Mr. Premadasa. Bala briefed us thoroughly about Mr. Premadasa - the man, his personal history and political philosophy. Bala had known him personally during his young journalist days in Colombo. Born into a depressed caste with humble origins, Premadasa rose to the highest position of power in the country through hard work, perseverance and self-discipline. He was also a poet and a novelist. Though he embraced a right wing capitalist party (UNP) when he was a young man, he committed himself to a socialist political philosophy and worked with dedication for the socio-economic development of the poor. As the Minister of Local Government and later as Prime Minister, Mr. Premadasa launched island-wide community welfare movements to promote economic equality and justice. The famous 'one hundred thousand houses scheme' made him popular

as a 'man of the people'. Though Mr. Premadasa practised progressive politics, his sphere of work and influence was confined to the South, primarily amongst the Sinhala peasants and the working classes. In spite of his lengthy and complex political experience, he had a very narrow and limited understanding of the dynamics behind the Tamil liberation struggle. He was opposed to any form of regional autonomy or self-rule for the Tamils. For him the concept of Tamil homeland and secession were blasphemous, since he always spoke of one people, one nation, and one homeland. Essentially Mr. Premadasa was a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist with a strong element of chauvinism, which he cleverly concealed under the politics of a unitary state. In his lengthy political history, he never took an active interest in the resolution of the Tamil conflict but rather functioned as a silent partner in the dark history of state repression under the UNP regime. His ultra-nationalist sentiments made him fearful and suspicious of India, whose power projection in the region, he felt, was a threat to Sri Lanka. His strong opposition to the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and to the induction of the Indian Peace Keeping troops and his determination to throw the Indian army off the island were the external manifestation of his internal fear of Indian hegemony. There was thus undeniably a convergence of interests between the LTTE and Mr. Premadasa insofar as securing the withdrawal of the Indian army of occupation which had become a serious threat to our political struggle. With this commonality of interest, we felt we could do business with Mr. Premadasa.

Bala, myself, Mr Yogaratanam Yogi, Mr. Paramu Murthy, were driven in a convoy of STF commandos to President Premadasa's private residence 'Suchitra'. At precisely 5 p.m his assistants took us into his meeting room. Apart from the Sri Lankan flag on one side, the Presidential insignia on the wall, and a few photos of Mr. Premadasa meeting international dignitaries etc the room was an understatement of power and authority. The President came forward from this simple surrounding to greet us.

Mr. Premadasa was exactly as many photos I had seen of him portrayed: immaculately groomed, black shiny hair with not a wisp out of place, complimented by his spotlessly clean white national dress. Indeed his appearance corresponded with the general opinion that Mr. Premadasa was a meticulous man, highly disciplined in his personal behaviour and expecting the same stands from those around him.

The President did not make any attempt to extend his hand to me as we entered his office, but preferred to greet me in typical Asian style. (In Tamil and Sinhala custom, men and women do not shake hands on meeting, but rather fold the hands together near the chin with a slight bowing of the head) A twinge of guilt or perhaps hypocrisy flickered through me during this greeting, for here I was, exchanging niceties with a person whom I had criticised as one of the main perpetrators of oppression against the Tamils. I discovered my 'adversary' was a pleasant and hospitable man. But a man doesn't become President by social niceties alone and I was anxious to learn more of the mind behind this appearance of perfection. Of course, as diplomatic niceties dictate, his opening remarks conveyed his pleasure at the positive response of the LTTE to his invitation to talks. Bala reciprocated by conveying his appreciation to Mr. Premadasa's for not having stipulated any pre-conditions for talks.

At the outset Mr. Premadasa attempted to impress upon the LTTE delegates that he was a friend of the Tamils and understood their predicament and their political struggle. In his simplistic conception the ethnic conflict was a problem between the big brother and the small brother, an internal, fraternal problem that had to be resolved by the parties in conflict. He blamed the former President Julius Jayawardene for creating a political space allowing India to intervene in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka; a blunder that triggered off island wide violence, caused a bloodbath and chaos. Emphasising his triple principles of consultation, compromise and consensus, he said that the ethnic conflict could be resolved to the satisfaction of all the communities living in the 'island nation', a concept he consistently emphasised to impress upon us that a solution had to be found within the unitary constitution. Bala, as the chief negotiator, was inclined to avoid issues that might create controversies and shifted the dialogue to the immediate and urgent issues the problems of Indian military occupation, the war of resistance and the suffering of the Tamil civilian masses - issues that were of grave concern to the LTTE and the Tamils. Drawing on first hand facts and figures, Bala was able to provide Mr. Premadasa with a comprehensive analysis of the situation in the Northeast and the conditions of suffering of the Tamil civilians living under the Indian military occupation and persecution. Indian intervention had not resolved the Tamil question but rather aggravated the conflict to a dangerous level. The Tamil people suffered enormously and thousands had perished. The IPKF had drawn an iron curtain over the Northeast and was preventing news leaking to the outside world, Bala explained to the amazement of the President. He also drove home the pertinent point that while there were widespread protests, opposition and rebellion in the South on the question of Indian military occupation, it was the LTTE which was involved in an armed resistance campaign fighting the occupation army and therefore should be credited with genuine patriotism. This point was well taken by the nationalist in Mr. Premadasa who quickly responded with an appreciation of Mr. Pirabakaran and his guerrilla fighters for their courage, commitment and sense of patriotism. He condemned the JVP rebels as cowards arguing that they were killing innocent civilians but frightened to throw a stone at the Indian army of occupation. Furthermore, Bala explained to the President, the LTTE was vehemently opposed to the Indian attempts to consolidate the EPRLF's control of the Northeast Provincial Council by building a private militia in the name of Civilian Volunteer Force (CVF) through forceful recruitment of students. The Northeast Provincial administration was a fraudulently elected body and despised by the Tamil people, Mr. Premadasa was told. Another major issue requiring clarification before the talks got underway, Bala stressed to Premadasa, was the framework for the talks. The LTTE, he was emphatic, had no intention of reducing the talks to the terms and conditions of the IndoSri Lanka Accord. The LTTE had rejected the Accord from the outset and they would not be brought to accept it 'through the back door'. Premadasa appeared comfortable with these positions and confided that he had already rejected the request by the Indian Foreign Secretary, Mr. Singh, to confine the dialogue to the terms of reference of the Accord, during a recent briefing after the announcement of the talks had been made. Thus ended the two hours of constructive dialogue. Both parties were pleased with the inaugural meeting. In conclusion, Mr. Premadasa assured the LTTE delegates that he would meet them regularly to facilitate the peace process. He also told Bala to contact him directly by phone if and when there were any difficulties in the talks.

An Army of Occupation

On the following day, 5th May, the first round of talks between the Government delegation and the LTTE took place in the Hilton Hotel. The Government was represented by Mr. K HJ Wijayadasa, Presidential Secretary, Mr. Bernard Tilakaratna, Foreign Secretary, Mr. Bradman Weerakoon, President's Advisor on International Affairs, General Cyril Ranatunga, Secretary to the Minister of State for Defence, General Sepala Attygalle, Secretary of Defence, Mr. W T Jayasinghe, Secretary to Cabinet Sub-Committee and Mr. Felix Dias Abeysinghe, Election commissioner. Thus, the Government's team constituted a second level delegation of senior officials who were also close confidantes of Mr. Premadasa. The objective of the meeting was to workout the modalities and agenda for further dialogue. In the discussions that lasted for more than two hours, the LTTE delegation elaborated the atrocities and human rights violations of the IPKF and argued that the withdrawal of the Indian army should constitute the central theme of the dialogue. The role of the Provincial administration, the problem of Sinhala colonisation in Tamil areas, the problems of the Tamil refugees, the rehabilitation and re-construction of the Northeast were also put as issues in the agenda that needed immediate action. With the agenda agreed upon, the next meeting was scheduled for 11th May.

In a brief meeting with the President on the 11th, one hour before the commencement of talks, Mr. Premadasa spelled out clearly how he expected the talks to proceed. Being a pragmatist and a shrewd strategist, Mr. Premadasa had worked out his own scheme meticulously for handling the talks with the LTTE. It involved a systematic and progressive expansion of the Government team from a bureaucratic level to a political level involving senior Ministers. The initial stage of the dialogue should address the urgent existential problems of the people of the Northeast to be followed by political discussions - in later stages aimed at resolving the ethnic conflict, he felt. He also suggested that there would be intervals between the rounds of talks to enable the LTTE delegates to visit the Northern jungles to consult with Mr. Pirabakaran. Mr. Premadasa also informed us that he had upgraded his team of negotiators to Ministerial level but the accredited senior officials of the first team would assist the Ministers in the negotiations. He introduced the four Ministers who would participate in that day's session and thereafter. New Ministers would be inducted in the process depending on the topic of discussion, he said. Mr. Premadasa had chosen Mr. A C S Hameed, the former Foreign Minister in Jayawardene's government and now the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, as the chief negotiator to lead the government delegation. The other Ministers were Mr. Ranjan Wijeratne, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Ranil Wickremasinghe, Minister of Industries and Mr. Sirisena Cooray, Minister of Housing and Construction. President Premadasa also advised both delegations to be open and frank at discussions and involve in proper dialogue rather than debate. After a brief exposition of his tripartite principles (the three C's), he allowed both the teams to proceed to the Hilton Hotel and engage in further discussions.

There were several rounds of talks with the Ministerial team, as well and separately with the President, consisting in total of nine sessions from 4th May till 30th May 1989. During our

dialogue with the Ministerial delegation we focused primarily on the Indian military occupation of the Tamil homeland and the atrocities committed against the Tamil people. For the Tigers and the Tamil people, these were crucial problems, life and death issues. We planned to internationalise the matter of Indian military intervention by bringing to light the gross human rights violations by the IPKF. The international community had been led to believe that the Indian troops were doing a wonderful job of maintaining peace in the troubled island of Sri Lanka. Previously we had not been able to challenge the formidable propaganda machinery of the Indian government and its global diplomatic network. It was only now, with the opening of a peace dialogue in Colombo and with the backing of the new administration under Mr. Premadasa who shared our sentiments, that we had a forum to articulate our views and expose the truth. During the sessions of the first round of talks with the Sri Lankan Ministerial delegation, Bala, as the head of the LTTE delegation, presented the Tamil perspective of the Indian military rule in the Northeast. His central argument was that the Indian troops stationed in the Tamil homeland of Northeastern Sri Lanka could not be categorised as a peace keeping force, but constituted an army of occupation. From my notes taken at these meetings, I reproduce the arguments advanced by Bala in the following terms.

‘There is a clear UN conception of what constitutes a peacekeeping exercise. There are internationally acceptable norms and standards of controlling conflicts and promoting peace. A peacekeeping army is a neutral force that stands between two or more conflicting parties or combatants. The main function of a peacekeeping operation is help maintain or restore peace in areas of conflict. A peacekeeping operation is a conflict control exercise. A peacekeeping force, in the UN tradition, is mandated to prevent escalation of a conflict situation and to create congenial conditions of peace. A peacekeeping operation involves deployment of military personnel without enforcement powers. The military personnel are not authorised to use force except in self-defence and they always carry light defensive weapons. A peacekeeping force should not act in any way to influence the balance of forces between the parties in conflict. These are basic guidelines and principles that govern the function of peace keeping. These are the internationally accepted norms. Under these guidelines and norms, the Indian army did not qualify to hold the status of a peacekeeping force. Originally, under the terms of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement, an Indian military contingent was brought to Sri Lanka for a peace keeping exercise to monitor and supervise the cessation of hostilities between the Sri Lankan armed forces and the LTTE fighters. But soon after the Indian army assumed entirely a different role and became an active and dominant participant in an armed conflict with one of the combatants the LTTE. The armed conflict, though it was characterised as a disarming process, soon became an all out war between the Indian troops and the Tiger guerrillas. The war has continued unabated for the last twenty months and the Indian army and the LTTE have become the parties in conflict. Since a neutral mediating force for peace has directly involved itself in a military conflict the status of the Indian peace keeping enterprise has become questionable. The Indian military intervention and its offensive operations have violated all acceptable norms and practices of peace keeping. The Indian army operating in Tamil areas is no more a neutral force. It does not control conflict or promote peace. Instead of preventing the aggravation of conflict, the conduct of the Indian troops has escalated violence

and intensified the conflict. The Indian army has assumed extraordinary enforcement powers and has directly involved in the domestic affairs of this country. It is the considered view of the LTTE that the Indian troops present in the Tamil areas are not a peace keeping force but an army of occupation’.

The indepth critique of the role and function of the Indian forces by the LTTE delegation in the Colombo peace talks, and the joint statements revealing the theme and content of the discussions, generated tensions in the diplomatic relations between Rajiv’s administration and the Premadasa regime. The Indian Foreign Ministry registered strong protests with Sri Lanka for providing a forum for the LTTE to discredit Delhi. In India’s perception, the IPKF was sent to Northeastern Sri Lanka in accordance with the provisions of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. In other words, the IPKF was inducted to help Sri Lanka to maintain peace by de-commissioning the LTTE’s arms. But now Colombo had joined hands with its historical enemy and was discrediting the Indian military force that had been doing the fighting on Sri Lanka’s behalf. When the issue of Indian protests was raised at the dialogue, the LTTE delegation countered by arguing that the IPKF had miserably failed in the tasks of maintaining peace and disarming the LTTE. On the contrary, the war had escalated and the Indian troops were turning their guns on Tamil civilians to avenge their losses. The LTTE delegates further argued that more than five thousand Tamil civilians had lost their lives in this peace keeping enterprise and that it was the duty and responsibility of the Sri Lankan state to protect the lives of the Tamil people if it considered them its citizens.

The Role of Mr. Hameed

Following the expression of displeasure by Delhi, the drafting of joint press releases after each session became a difficult task. Mr. Hameed, Bala and I were given this sensitive job. Since the criticism of Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, the atrocities by the Indian troops and the demand for the withdrawal of the IPKF were the main themes that dominated the dialogue, the drafting of joint statements that would not offend or provoke the Indian government was a challenging task. Sometimes it took several hours to construct a few sentences. Bala insisted that the theme and content of the discussions should be incorporated in the joint statements. Mr. Hameed wanted to avoid controversies with India and sliced off the flesh of the dialogues leaving only a skeleton. Bala was concerned with the plight and predicament of his people and argued that the reality must be revealed to the world. With his profound experience in diplomacy, Mr. Hameed was concerned about sensitivity in international relations and did not want to displease Delhi. Though it took time and patience it was a pleasure to work with Mr. Hameed. He was a master at resolving contradictions.

The choice of Mr. Hameed was a shrewd act of diplomacy and politics by Mr. Premadasa. Indisputably, had Mr. Hameed not been on the scene, the Indians might still be in the North-east. Of course, Mr. Hameed was chosen because he was a member of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. Presumably Mr. Premadasa assumed that the common link as members of the

island's Tamil speaking communities would provide a basis for rapport and a working relationship between the LTTE delegates and Mr. Hameed. That was certainly a relevant point. But Mr. Hameed's success in the talks with the LTTE cannot be reduced only to his empathy with the Tamils, but from his own remarkable personal attributes also. Although small in physique Mr. Hameed was, in my view, a man of great stature. Whether it was his patience that contributed to his skilled diplomacy or his years as a Foreign Minister that had fostered his infinite patience, my knowledge of him was insufficient to decide. But certainly patience was an admirable characteristic of Mr Hameed: it made him a wise man also. His intellect was as sharp as a razor. When Mr Hameed sat down at the negotiating table, he came well armed with specific objectives and a well thought out strategy to achieve them. Indeed, he planned his argument as if playing a game of chess. As secretary to the LTTE delegation, I was provided with the opportunity of being an observer as Mr. Hameed took the dialogue on its intended course. He measured every word, in anticipation of an expected reply, to which he had a contingency answer. And so he would work his way to the conclusion he aimed at. Aware of Mr. Hameed's objectives, Bala prepared himself and the intellectual dual between the two during the talks became a fascinating struggle. Meeting his match, Mr. Hameed was well tuned to the cutting off point. As leader of the Sri Lankan team he had his finger on the pulse of the response and sentiments of his colleagues and he neatly avoided contradictions to prevent the souring of the tone of the talks and the spoiling of potential agreements. In another shrewd move, Mr. Premadasa kept the hard-line racists, Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake, out of the talks. Had we met them across the table it is doubtful that that the talks would have got past the first round, such was the antipathy between us.

But as most experienced diplomats well know, what is said and commented on at the 'public' negotiating table is not always the full story. The private negotiating time is often as important, if not more so, than the public. Mr. Hameed was an advocate of private diplomacy. For him, complicated, subtle and contested issues could be best explored in private confidences away from the glare of the public. In pursuit of this strategy he often met Bala for private discussions in the evenings in our hotel. And it was during these times Bala and Mr. Hameed established a healthy rapport and respect for each other. While it was true that Mr. Hameed wanted to broach issues such as the administration of the Northeast after the withdrawal of the Indian troops, Bala, equally, conveyed the LTTE's position on this and many other matters. The maturity of both Mr. Hameed and Bala meant that there was unlikely to be any ugly public debates or damaging political fallouts on major differences of opinion. But in general Mr. Hameed was popular and respected on a personal level by Bala and myself and by the LTTE in general. His supplying of deliciously prepared Muslim buriani and goat meat curry to the LTTE delegation added that all-important human touch to an otherwise calculated political process. Furthermore, it was Mr. Pirabakaran's high regard for Mr. Hameed that brought the two together in dialogue and allowed the talks to continue for as long as they did. Sri Lankan politics is certainly bereft of people of calibre and stature since his unexpected and sad demise. We miss him.

As the peace talks between the government and the LTTE progressed, focusing primarily on the abuses and excesses of the Indian army in the Tamil homeland, Delhi became uneasy

and annoyed. For Rajiv's administration it was a serious diplomatic embarrassment. Though severely constrained by Mr. Hameed's cautious censorship, the joint press releases received publicity locally and internationally, exposing war crimes by Indian troops. Delhi's displeasure was expressed sharply through a press interview given by the Indian High Commissioner in Colombo, Mr. Lakan Lal Mehrotra on 14th May 1989 defending the role and function of the IPKF and criticising the LTTE for propagating 'misinformation'. Since Mr. Mehrotra's interview received widespread publicity in the local media and was thoroughly misleading, the LTTE delegation took up the issue at the Ministerial meeting on 16th May and demanded that their response should be incorporated fully in the joint release without rigorous censorship.

The LTTE delegates rejected the central point advanced by the Indian envoy that the Indian army had restored peace and harmony to the Northeast. On the contrary, the Tigers argued, the Indian army had brought "intensified violence and terror and the war still continued unabated in the Tamil provinces". Rejecting Mehrotra's contention that the Indian army had used minimal force in their disarming operations against the LTTE, the Tiger representatives said that the Indian troops had used maximum force with heavy weapons including field artillery, heavy mortars, tanks and helicopter gunships. Describing the High Commissioner's statement that civilian casualties were minimal as a deliberate distortion of truth, the LTTE declared that they had already submitted concrete evidence confirming the deaths of more than five thousand Tamil civilians. Dismissing the envoy's claim that the Indian disarming project was a success and the LTTE had lost its fighting capacity and was marginalised in the jungle, the Tigers stated that their guerrilla units were engaging the Indian army all over the Northeast and inflicting considerable casualties and causing demoralisation among the troops. The LTTE delegates also queried as to why the Indian army, which had been carrying out de-commissioning operations against the LTTE, was arming other Tamil groups and recruiting a voluntary force called the Tamil National Army. Such activities, the Tiger delegates argued, violated the very spirit and the cardinal obligations of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. The LTTE delegates also presented a detailed account of the extreme hardships experienced by the Tamil people as a consequence of various restrictions and proscriptions imposed by the Indian army on day to day economic activities which had severely disrupted agriculture, industry and fishing in the Northeast. At the end of the meeting, we struggled successfully with Mr. Hameed to include most of our viewpoints articulated in response to the Indian High Commissioner, in the joint press release.

Delhi's Critique of Talks

The joint press release, which was given wide publicity both locally and internationally, provoked Rajiv's government into issuing a critical note through its High Commission in Colombo. The Indian release said:

"The High Commission of India has noted with regret the Sri Lankan government communiqués conveying the view of one party to the talks over the role and function

of the IPKF in Sri Lanka and casting unwarranted aspersions on it. The High Commission notes that these communiqués make no reference to the circumstances in which the IPKF came to this country, the mandate that has been given to it jointly by the Governments of India and Sri Lanka, the immense difficulties of its task and the enormous sacrifices it has been making in an attempt to preserve the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka. As a result, a misleading impression may be created in the minds of the people. It was our impression that the purpose of the current talks was not to provide a propaganda forum but to address themselves to the objective of bringing all concerned into the democratic process by giving up violence and accepting a commitment to the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka. If unfounded charges are made, it can only be expected that there would be a response to set the record straight”.¹

At the Ministerial meeting, resumed on the morning of 18th May, two new Ministers, Mr. U B Wijekoon, Minister of Public Administration, Provincial Council and Home Affairs, Mr. P Dayaratne, Minister of Lands, Irrigation and Mahaveli Development were inducted to the meeting. The LTTE delegates wanted to discuss the issues raised by the Indian government in its critique of the peace talks between the LTTE and the Sri Lanka government. Bala, as the LTTE's chief negotiator, argued that the mandate given to the Indian army was to restore peace, normalcy and harmony in the Tamil regions, but not to wage a war against the Tamil people. The induction of the Indian troops with a mandate for peace keeping had created conditions of war in the Northeast and also turbulence and rebellion in the South, Bala said. Mr. Hameed argued that the Indian troops were mandated not only to maintain peace but also to disarm all militant organisations including the LTTE. To which the Bala retorted that the time frame given to the Indian troops to disarm the militants according to the Accord, was precisely seventy two hours, but the Indians could not disarm the Tigers even after twenty months and therefore the Indian government had failed to fulfil its mandate. The Tiger delegates also pointed out that, according to a clause in the Accord, India and Sri Lanka were obliged to co-operate to ensure the physical safety and security of all the people in the Northeastern Province. The LTTE criticised the Sri Lankan government for its studied silence

¹Kanapathipillai Poopathy affectionately and reverently known as 'Poopathy Amma' amongst the Tamil people, is one of the most remarkable women in the history of the Tamil freedom struggle. Poopathy Amma was born in the Batticaloa village of Kiran on 3rd November 1932. On 19th March 1988, the fifty six year old grandmother Poopathy Amma staged a fast-to-death at Mahmangam Pillayar temple, demanding an immediate, unconditional cease-fire between the LTTE and the IPKF and unconditional talks between the LTTE and the Indian government. Poopathy Amma's life was one of both personal tragedy and courage. Two of her sons were killed during military operations and round-ups of villages by the Sri Lankan armed forces and another was taken into custody and tortured. She became a vociferous critic of human rights violations by the Sri Lankan armed forces and was a political activist and social worker. She was outraged by the death and mayhem caused by the IPKF during the Indo-LTTE war. When the Indian army banned political activity, Poopathy Amma ignored the orders and organised demonstrations and protests against the IPKF atrocities. When the IPKF harassed fasting women protestors, Poopathy Amma undertook the hunger strike to achieve her political objectives. For thirty days Poopathy Amma refused food and FLUIDS before she succumbed. Her fast-to-death exceeded the duration of Thileepan's struggle in September 1987, about which I have written in Chapter IV.

when it had become very apparent that thousands of civilians had perished and the safety and security of the Tamils were in grave danger. The Tigers also complained that the Indian army had been building up a formidable military machine called the Tamil National Army by forcibly recruiting, training and arming Tamil youth to protect and preserve the EPRLF's Provincial administration. This formation of a military apparatus would lead to a civil war and bloodbath in Tamil areas, the LTTE representatives warned.

Referring to the critique by the Indian High Commission the LTTE delegation stated that the Indian authorities misunderstood their mission. The LTTE negotiators reiterated that they were in Colombo to seek an end to war and violence that had been devastating the Tamil homeland and causing untold suffering to the Tamil people. The purpose of their mission was to seek a negotiated political settlement that should fulfil the national aspirations of the Tamils, they said.

On 23rd May 1989, the discussions at the Ministerial meeting centred on the issue of Sinhala colonisation in Tamil areas, particularly in the Eastern Province. Presenting a lengthy paper with statistics and maps, the LTTE delegation maintained that since independence there had been continued colonisation in the Eastern Province and that these colonisation schemes were state sponsored. Planned colonisation was one of the main factors behind the ethnic conflict, they argued. This had not only changed the demographic patterns of the Tamil areas but also drastically affected the social, economic and political life of the Tamil-speaking people. Thousands of Tamils and Muslims had been driven away from their historical habitations under the ruthless policy of discriminatory colonisation, the LTTE delegation argued. The topic generated lengthy and heated discussion and finally it was agreed to refer the issue to the President.

On 27th May 1989, when Mr. Hameed met the LTTE delegation to respond to queries raised by the Tigers in previous meetings, he assured again us that the President was firmly committed to the removal of Indian troops from the island. Mr. Hameed also said that the President wanted to study details of specific colonisation schemes before taking action to stop them. Mr. Hameed also revealed that Mr. Premadasa favoured a declared cessation of hostilities between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan forces. The LTTE delegates said that they had to consult with Mr. Pirabakaran on the issue of cease-fire. An undeclared cease-fire was already in force since the beginning of the talks, they said. Mr. Hameed told the LTTE delegates that the President was very keen that the LTTE should enter the political mainstream once the IPKF left the island. He further said that Mr. Premadasa was prepared to dissolve the Northeastern Provincial Council if the LTTE pledged to stand for the elections. The LTTE delegates said that they would have to consult the leadership in Vanni before making any commitments on the issues raised by Mr. Hameed.

The last session of the first round of talks was held on 28th May 1989. It was a winding up meeting to assess the progress of the talks. Both parties agreed that the sessions held so far had opened the doors for greater understanding and appreciation of the issues involved and had laid a firm basis for future negotiations. The two delegations consented that the fundamental

problem was ethnic in character and had to be resolved through direct negotiations in a spirit of tolerance and understanding.

Meeting Pirabakaran in the Jungle

On 30th May 1989, Bala and myself, Yogi, Murthy, Jude and our bodyguards were taken to Vanni by Sri Lankan Airforce helicopter to consult with Mr. Pirabakaran. There was on our part also, an aspiration to meet Mr. Pirabakaran and our cadres again to renew old friendships and to share notes on the experiences we had all gone through since the outbreak of the Indo-LTTE war in 1987. The camp we were heading for was the 'one four' base, Mr. Pirabakaran's headquarters. The Indians had launched a series of operations against the camps in this area. After failing to destroy the LTTE during 'Operation Pawan' in the Jaffna Peninsula, the Indian army turned towards the LTTE bases in the Vanni jungles transforming the area into a sprawling theatre of brutal and bloody war. Massive military operations were carried out with the strategic objective of flushing out and destroying the LTTE guerrillas and their leadership. Thousands and thousands of fresh Indian troops were mobilised to carry out these operations. Special commando units with counter-insurgency expertise were inducted. Armoured vehicles and helicopter gunships were utilised for troop movements and offensive assaults. Tens of thousands of Indian troops spread across the area from as far as Mullaitivu on the Eastern coast to Ottusuddan in Vanni, extending Northeast towards Killinochchi. Widespread and intensive cordon and search operations took place. A large number of civilians were killed in these operations but the main targets - the LTTE - remained protected and active in the deep jungles.

Having failed to dislodge the LTTE in these initial attacks, the Indian military high command planned further operations. From June 1988, the Indian army launched a series of operations code-named 'Checkmate'. In those operations, the Indian army singled out the LTTE bases in Alampil jungles. A massive aerial and artillery bombardment pounded the area. Thousands of tons of powerful bombs and artillery shells rained down, day and night, on LTTE positions. Yet this intensive campaign proved to be a failure and the LTTE casualties remained surprisingly minimal. In the ground battles, the special commando units of Indian troops, though experienced in jungle warfare, suffered humiliating defeats against LTTE guerrillas. Sri Lankan troops also suffered casualties in the Manal Aru area when, on 15th April a mixed unit of men and women guerrillas attacked their patrol, killing twenty one soldiers on the spot.

Since Mr. Pirabakaran's well fortified camps were deep in the jungle it was decided that our helicopter landing zone should be in the Alampil jungles in Mullaitivu, and not at Nederkerni as on the previous occasion. This way, the trekking distance to Mr. Pirabakaran's base camp was considerably reduced. At the landing zone, dozens of cadres were deployed, waiting for our arrival. We were still at war with India and there was absolutely no reason to believe that they would not embark on a military campaign in the area. In view of the anti-Indian stance

coming out of the Colombo talks, we were concerned that the IPKF would attempt to exact revenge during our landing in Alampil. Hence the heavy presence of our cadres. Soon after touching down, Sothia - from our old days in Chennai - appeared from the jungle leading a group of armed female cadres as part of the escort detail. Her bearing indicated tremendous growth in confidence. Furthermore, she was by now a battle-hardened cadre having gained experience in combat against both the Sri Lankan and Indian armies. But most of all, she was extremely popular amongst the women fighters and had become a consensual choice as their leader. She had been promoted to the rank of leader of the women fighters. Sothia later died of cardiac arrest after contracting a fatal viral infection, which attacked the heart while she was in the Alampil jungle during the period of occupation by the Indian army. Sothia's death deprived the women fighters of a charismatic personality and talented leader. Sothia's second in command was Sugi, her friend from the Chennai days when they joined the LTTE together. She became the second leader of the LTTE women fighters.

As we were to soon discover, our flight journey from Colombo to Alampil was far shorter than the walk to Mr. Pirabakaran's jungle camp. We trudged for hours, along camouflaged jungle tracks, across streams and through thick jungle foliage. Bala, affected by his diabetes, was unable to walk the distance and a chair suspended between two poles was arranged for him to sit in while a team of cadres took their turn at carrying it on their shoulders. The cadre in charge of the security detail escorting us to Mr. Pirabakaran's camp on this occasion was the veteran Shankar. Shankar's relationship with the movement and Mr. Pirabakaran dates back to the old days when Mr. Pirabakaran had a small group of guerrillas training in the Vanni jungles. He subsequently spent some time in Canada where he studied aeronautical engineering. Like many Tamils, the 1983 anti-Tamil riots outraged him and he travelled to Chennai to re-join Mr. Pirabakaran and the armed struggle. Mr. Shankar has a long history of battle experience and remains one of Mr. Pirabakaran's most trusted and loyal cadres. In casual conversation en route to Mr. Pirabakaran's base, Shankar advised me not to move off the track we were walking on, and dismissively mentioned that during their frequent incursions into the area, the Indians had liberally planted anti-personnel mines in the area. It would have been easy to freeze in fear on learning of this information, but no purpose would have been served. All our cadres walked on without concern for the danger they were in, so why should I be worried? The risks were the same for everyone, I thought. In such circumstances one mentally prepares and accepts any eventuality, and then goes beyond it. Being afraid would not have helped to avoid the mines; it would have only turned an otherwise pleasant journey into a stressful one. The Indian army had also left their mark in other ways also. Large sections of jungle with broken trees and deep craters - some filled with water - were the legacy of heavy aerial bombardment and relentless artillery shelling of the area.

Pushing on deeper into the jungle, we encountered patrols of cadres on long distance treks to pick up supplies, making us realise that we were deep into LTTE territory. The occasional sighting of armed and camouflaged sentries further indicated that we must have been nearing LTTE bases. Well-fortified sentry points appeared here and there. We walked on further and further, winding our way into the jungle. Then a glimpse of hut-like shapes appeared through the foliage. Before long we found ourselves nearing a heavily camouflaged cottage.

Mr. Pirabakaran had obviously been kept informed of our approach and quickly appeared on the scene after we arrived at the camp. Dressed in jungle greens, but looking none the worse for his year or more of living in the jungle, he greeted us warmly. More like an extended village than a guerrilla camp the surroundings were neat indicating that through their trials and tribulations, Mr. Pirabakaran had sustained the high morale of his cadres. But the neatness of the camp in no way reflected the phenomenal struggle by our cadres and the difficulties they had triumphed over to create it. This expansive complex had been cleared of virgin jungle leaving only the ancient massive trees for cover - in order to make it habitable. Teams of cadres had worked together, pulling out rocks and digging out deep holes in the ground in search of water. On several occasions, sixty to seventy foot deep wells were laboriously dug only to discover there was no water at that site. The process would then be repeated in a different place until they struck a reliable water supply. In the early days of the camp, regular food supplies had not been established and the cadres survived on one daily meal of rice and dahl, without salt. To overcome this difficulty, it was necessary for the cadres to trek long distances through the mine-infested jungle to open and establish new routes for access to rations. The procurement of rations took anything up to a day's journey, with cadres often having to avoid interception by Indian jungle patrols. Sacks of rice, flour, sugar and other supplies were carried on shoulders on the long journey back to base. The women cadres also took their turns on these dangerous missions. With the jungle tamed and camp made habitable, life had obviously settled into order and routine when we arrived there. The presence of large numbers of bunkers carved out in the jungle floor highlighted the threat from shelling and bombing. Remarkably, casualties from the relentless shelling of Mr. Pirabakaran's camp were minimal. Only two women cadres had died in that base. By drilling into his cadres the discipline of taking and remaining under cover until the artillery barrages halted - even if it meant spending hours in the bunkers without food and water Mr. Pirabakaran was successful in reducing his casualties. The nature and structure of our underground accommodation also impressed on us the perils the cadres had been subjected to by the relentless barrages of artillery shelling and aerial bombardment. As a precautionary measure in the event of the Indians shelling the area during our stay in the jungle, Mr. Pirabakaran asked us to stay in a deep underground shelter. We had read about the amazing feat by thousands of Vietnamese guerrillas who dug out kilometres of tunnels and bunkers to facilitate the security and mobility of the Viet Cong during the war of liberation against America. Now we were to see for ourselves an example of such remarkable human endeavour. As we descended into the depths of the earth via precisely cut out steps, we could only marvel at the ingenuity, patience and the collective spirit of the cadres who had undertaken and completed this Herculean task. Our cadres led us down the steps into a room about thirty to forty feet underground. To our utter amazement we could see that this subterranean haven of tunnels and rooms had been chiselled out of the underground rocks in this area of the jungle. Our room had been carved out high enough to stand up in and big enough to move around comfortably. Leading off the room through the narrow tunnel, we came to another smaller room; it was a purpose built toilet. Mr. Pirabakaran's room was even deeper underground than ours. Low lying roofs constructed over the bunkers, and banks to divert water, prevented the monsoon rains from pouring in and flooding the bunkers. Stronger than concrete, this underground granite structure stood up to the heavy

downpours of monsoon rains when the entire jungle turned into a muddy quagmire. There was only one problem with this ingenious set up, a difficulty which, had it been at all possible our cadres would certainly have overcome. But on this matter they had no control. Since we were deep into the earth where the sun's heat has no access, the room was absolutely freezing, particularly at night. My bones ached from the cold and I wondered how it could be endured over a sustained period of time. But obviously it had been, and without any ill effects.

Several kitchens had been set up with large eating areas. Some cadres worked at repairing and maintaining the weaponry in an armoury. A small dispensary and hospital had been built. A network of paths connected the various sections of the camp. There was playing area for team games. More poignant was the small, neatly maintained cemetery where some of the cadres killed in battle, rested peacefully.

The female cadres were active too, having established a huge camp just a few minutes walk from the main base. The usual Premadasa - LTTE Talks kitchens, medics centre, tailoring shop, armoury etc were all functioning efficiently. Sections of their camp had been designated for military training and a complete obstacle course had been constructed for this purpose. Contrary to the expectation of many analysts, recruitment to the LTTE had not declined. In fact it was quite the opposite. Many families preferred their sons and daughters to join the LTTE believing that they had a greater chance of survival in the LTTE camps than remaining in the villages exposed to the IPKF's brutality and the forced recruitment campaign of the EPRLF. New cadres were in the process of undergoing training, while others were waiting to begin in the next batch. In a different section of the jungle, some distance away, an advanced training course for senior women cadres was underway. Jeyanthi was in charge of this commando course and she went on to succeed Sugi as the women's military wing leader after the LTTE's return to Jaffna. Amongst this batch of senior women cadres was Vidusa, the present day leader of the LTTE women fighters. Most of these courageous young women went on to fight many heroic battles that became inspiring and legendary stories of their own. Sadly, of this initial advanced commando training course for women only a few are alive now.

We were also happy to see Kittu at the camp. Kittu was arrested and held in custody in Chennai in a round up of LTTE cadres in Tamil Nadu in 1988, just a few days after our escape from India. He was subsequently transferred back to Jaffna, and as a concession to his physical handicap, the IPKF high command freed him from custody. He immediately found his way back to Mr. Pirabakaran and the LTTE cadres in the jungles of Mullaitivu. Kittu was a great morale booster and inspired the cadres when he was in the jungle with Mr. Pirabakaran during this time. Always interested in learning and a great advocate of developing oneself, Kittu spent time giving classes to the cadres and generally showing an interest in their activities. A keen photographer, he took many pictures including those of Mr. Pirabakaran and us during our stay there.

Pottu Amman was also in Alampil. At that time he was functioning as a field commander in the Jaffna Peninsula. He had been called for consultation with Mr. Pirabakaran. Fully recovered from his injuries, he was actively waging a successful urban guerrilla campaign against the IPKF in Jaffna. Kapil Amman, another senior LTTE cadre with a long history of battles to

his credit, and our enduring and loyal friend from as far back as the Chennai days, trekked from Trincomalee jungles to visit us in Mullaitivu.

While I was busy spending time with the women cadres, Bala held deliberations with Mr. Pirabakaran and other leaders. According to Bala, Mr. Pirabakaran was very keen to learn about Mr. Premadasa - his ideas, his strategy and most importantly his views about the Indian military occupation and the Tamil armed resistance. Bala gave him a comprehensive briefing of what had transpired between Mr. Premadasa and the LTTE delegation. From Colombo, Bala had been sending brief coded messages to Mr. Pirabakaran, but now he could provide a thorough assessment of personalities, their mode of thinking, their expectations and their apprehensions. He was able to convince the LTTE leader that Mr. Premadasa was fiercely determined to secure the withdrawal of the Indian troops to consolidate his personal power in Colombo, for which he needed the solid backing of the LTTE. He also told Mr. Pirabakaran that the President was willing to dissolve the EPRLF's Provincial administration if the LTTE entered the Sri Lankan political mainstream and faced elections. Finally the LTTE leadership was told that Mr. Premadasa wanted a cease-fire between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan forces so that he could pressurize India to terminate armed hostilities against the Tigers. Mr. Pirabakaran, Bala said, was favorably disposed to the idea of a cease-fire and an interim political settlement with Mr. Premadasa's government if Colombo was earnest and sincere. On the whole, Bala was given the green light by the LTTE leadership to advance the talks to secure the Indian troops withdrawal and to enter into a political accommodation with Premadasa's administration.

Before we left for Colombo for the second round of talks, Mr. Pirabakaran confided to us that the Indian army had intensified offensive operations against the LTTE with the support of the Tamil National Army which had become a serious irritant. Annoyed and humiliated by the ongoing peace talks, Rajiv's administration was determined to wipe out the LTTE leadership and their forces. Faced with a shortage of arms and ammunition, Mr. Pirabakaran requested Bala to seek assistance from Premadasa and sustain the LTTE's armed resistance campaign against intense Indian military onslaughts. There was genuine danger. We felt the chilling atmosphere in the jungle hideouts when the areas were subjected to systematic aerial and artillery bombardment. Confronted by three forces the Indian, Sri Lankan and the Tamil National Army - the LTTE guerrillas faced the most difficult time in the history to date of their armed struggle. The Sri Lankan military threat could be overcome by entering into a cease-fire agreement with Premadasa. Nevertheless, the Indian troops and the Tamil National Army posed a formidable threat. The LTTE had a fighting force of courageous, highly disciplined, guerrilla fighters. But to engage a formidable conventional military they needed arms and ammunition. At least they had to hold on until the Indians were withdrawn from the Tamil homeland. Apart from the role as the LTTE's chief negotiator, Bala was now given an extremely sensitive task, that of procuring weapons from the movement's hitherto historical enemy.

Acrimony between Delhi and Colombo

While we were enjoying a respite in the Alampil jungles of Mullaitivu with the guerrilla leaders and cadres, new developments took place in Colombo that created severe strains in the relations between Rajiv's administration and Premadasa's regime. The Sri Lankan President, addressing an audience at a Buddhist ceremony in the outskirts of Colombo, announced that he would demand from the Indian Prime Minister, that Indian troops should be withdrawn from Sri Lanka by the end of July 1989. Mr. Premadasa said that he was planning to host the South Asian Association for Regional Co-Operation (SAARC) Heads of States meeting in November that year but he could not do so when a foreign army was occupying Sri Lankan territory. The following day, on 2nd June Mr. Premadasa sent a letter to Mr. Rajiv Gandhi urging him to withdraw the IPKF by July 31st. The withdrawal of the IPKF would enable Sri Lanka to host the SAARC summit in November that year in a climate of tranquillity, Mr. Premadasa wrote. Stating that the presence of the IPKF had become a 'deeply divisive and resentful issue' he argued that the complete withdrawal of the troops would help to stabilise the situation. Annoyed by Premadasa's demand to pull the troops out within two months, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi did not respond immediately. But the officials of the South Block in Delhi issued statements indicating logistic difficulties in withdrawing several thousand Indian troops within a limited time span as demanded by Premadasa. On 14th June, addressing a public rally in Bangalore, the Indian Prime Minister, referring to Premadasa's demand, said that the IPKF would not be withdrawn until substantial powers were devolved to the EPRLF's Provincial administration and the safety and security of the Tamils were guaranteed. He also suggested further inter-governmental consultation on the issue of troop withdrawal. It was this background of diplomatic acrimony between Delhi and Colombo we arrived in the Sri Lanka capital on the evening of 14th June and were taken to our former place of accommodation the Colombo Hilton. For the second round of talks we expanded our delegation to include Mr. Lawrence Thilagar, Mr. S. Karikalan, Mr. Sammun Hassan and Mr. Abubakar Ibrahim.

On the morning of 15th June, Mr. Premadasa invited us to his residence 'Suchitra' for a private discussion, which lasted for nearly one and a half hours. He appeared to be disturbed over the statement made by Rajiv Gandhi on the previous day in Bangalore stipulating conditions for the withdrawal of the IPKF. Premadasa argued that India could not lay down such conditions. His logic was that the former President Jayawardene had invited the Indian troops and the present President wanted them to leave and that the Indian government had no choice but to withdraw the troops. He said that Mr. Gandhi had not yet replied to his official communication and instead had made a public statement stipulating unacceptable conditions that had generated fear and confusion among the people that the Indian army might remain forever in the island. Mr. Premadasa suggested that the LTTE should declare a cessation of hostilities with the Sri Lankan armed forces so that he could urge India to terminate all hostile armed operations against the Tigers and withdrew the troops since their main obligation to establish peace under the Accord had been secured.

The first two sessions of the second round of peace talks that took place on the 16th and 19th

of June between the LTTE representatives and the Sri Lankan Ministerial delegation focussed primarily on the mounting diplomatic confrontation between Sri Lanka and India over the question of troop withdrawal and the issue of forced recruitment of Tamil youth, particularly students in the Northeast, for the Tamil National Army under the name of Civilian Volunteer Force (CVF). Two new Sri Lankan Ministers, Mr. Festas Perera, Minister of Power and Energy and Mr. Monsoor, Minister of Trade and Shipping were inducted for these talks.

During the first session, Mr. Hameed, as the head of the Sri Lankan delegation, gave a detailed exposition of the developing diplomatic estrangement between India and Sri Lanka. In Mr. Hameed's analysis, Mr. Premadasa's insistence on the withdrawal of the IPKF was predicated on his firm conviction that the presence of the Indian army on the Sri Lankan soil was the causative factor for the war in the Northeast and the insurrection in the South. As the Accord had become defunct and the political situation in Sri Lanka had totally reversed in which the parties in conflict (LTTE and Sri Lanka) were engaged in peace negotiations to find a political solution, the IPKF had no role to play, Mr. Hameed explained. Since Mr. Premadasa wanted to host the SAARC summit in November, he demanded the quick withdrawal of the IPKF by the end of July. The demand had created serious problems for India,

Mr. Hameed said. He also explained that it would be logistically impossible to re-deploy thousands of troops and the war materials within two months. India was stipulating pre-conditions to gain time to avoid a humiliating troop withdrawal that would seriously undermine Rajiv's election chances in December, Mr. Hameed further said. Mr. Hameed enquired from the LTTE delegates their perception of the current situation. While accepting Mr. Hameed's exposition of the situation, the LTTE delegates argued that Rajiv's administration was also concerned about the future of EPRLF's Provincial regime. The Northeast Provincial Administration was the only remnant of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and that it would collapse like a pack of cards when the IPKF left the island, the Tigers said. Rajiv wanted to keep the IPKF until a strong paramilitary force was formed to protect the EPRLF's fragile administration, LTTE delegates argued.

The session of 19th June was primarily devoted to the issues of the EPRLF's paramilitary force and the question of cease-fire between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan security forces. The LTTE delegates complained that the Indian military authorities in collusion with the EPRLF's Provincial administration were involved in a programme of mass conscription of Tamil youth for the Civilian Volunteer Force. During the preceeding week 4,500 young men, mostly school going teenage boys, had been rounded up by the EPRLF's armed men and taken by force to various Indian army camps in Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai in the Eastern Province. This had become a problem in Tamil areas and thousands of anxious parents had been converging on Indian army camps pleading for the release of their children. The LTTE delegation enquired as to the Sri Lankan government's position on this issue. The Sri Lankan Ministerial delegation agreed that under the terms of the Accord there were no provisions for the creation of an armed force for the Provincial administration of the Northeast. Mr. Hameed assured us that the President would take up the issue with the Indian Prime Minister.

Discussing the issue of declaring a truce between the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE, the Government delegation urged the LTTE to declare a cessation of hostilities unilaterally which would be reciprocated by Sri Lanka at a later date. The LTTE delegation argued that there was already an informal, undeclared cease-fire in force between the Tigers and Sri Lankan forces since the commencement of talks. It would be proper for both the parties to declare a bi-lateral cease-fire to impress upon the international community that the protagonists of the conflict were observing peace and negotiating for a political settlement. In such an evidently congenial atmosphere there was no need for an external power to maintain a peace keeping army, the Tigers felt. The Ministers said that they would consult the President on the issue.

On 20th June, Mr. Gandhi responded to the letter written by Mr. Premadasa on 2nd of June. Though couched in diplomatic jargon Mr. Gandhi's letter praised the great achievements of the IPKF in establishing peace and normalcy in Tamil areas at the cost of heavy losses. Reminding Mr. Premadasa that Sri Lanka should be mindful of its responsibilities and obligations under the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, Mr. Gandhi suggested discussions to draw up a mutually agreed schedule for the withdrawal of the IPKF and for the full implementation of the Accord. To the annoyance of Mr. Premadasa, the Indian Prime Minister insisted that the implementation of the Accord and the withdrawal of the Indian troops should be 'parallel exercises'.

It became very clear from Mr. Gandhi's strongly worded letter that Indian troops would not be withdrawn by the end of July as demanded by Mr. Premadasa. India wanted to secure and stabilise the Provincial regime of Varatharaja Perumal before withdrawing its forces. But the methods adopted by the Indian military administration to do this made the Tamil people resentful. To escape forced conscription, the student population in several areas stayed at home. A substantial section that were arrested and forcefully trained, deserted their posts and joined the LTTE. Knowing very well that the forced recruitment of unwilling, disgruntled Tamil youth would not be a match for the battle-hardened Tiger guerrillas fiercely committed to a cause, the Indian army and the EPRLF nevertheless continued their conscription. Though Gandhi demanded more devolutionary powers for the Perumal administration, the Sri Lankan government systematically diluted all the administrative powers and even blocked the funds reducing the North East Provincial Council to a permanent state of bankruptcy.

Confrontationist Course

Angered by the hostile response from Mr. Gandhi, Mr. Premadasa sent a message to the LTTE delegation through Mr. Hameed that the Tigers should formally declare a truce with the Sri Lankan forces. Accordingly, the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government jointly declared a bi-lateral cessation of hostilities. It was made public through a joint press release on 28th June.

Pleased with this development, Mr. Premadasa sent a brief message to Mr. Gandhi on the 29th informing him that peace had been established between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan forces and the negotiating process was continuing, to settle political issues. Mr. Premadasa

also urged the Indian Prime Minister to instruct the IPKF to terminate all offensive actions against the LTTE which might ‘tend to prejudice’ the ongoing political negotiations.

On the following day (30th June) Mr. Premadasa received a brief reply from Mr. Rajiv Gandhi. Written in a hostile, sarcastic tone, the letter played down the significance of the LTTE- Sri Lanka truce and demanded the surrender of arms from the LTTE. To quote the relevant paragraphs of the letter:

“The Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement provides for a cessation of hostilities between the Tamil militant groups and the Sri Lankan forces and also for the Sri Lankan forces to stay in barracks in the North-east province. Both these were achieved on 30th July 1987. Thus, there has already been an effective cessation of hostilities between Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE. I am glad that the LTTE has now formally conceded this reality.

We hope that the formal agreement of the LTTE to cease hostilities clearly implies their commitment to the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka and to renounce violence and to respect democratic processes. We trust that, consequent to giving up violence, LTTE will resume surrender of arms through the Sri Lankan government - a process that had started on 5th August 1987 and is not yet complete. Unless the LTTE have undertaken to handover their arms and to renounce violence not only towards the Sri Lankan Government but towards the other citizens of the Northeastern Province, their announcement of cessation of hostilities would be meaningless”. ²

Rajiv’s letter clearly implied that Delhi did not want to enter into a cessation of hostilities with the LTTE. India wanted all obligations of the Accord to be fulfilled before considering that. Those obligations were included in a set of demands totally unacceptable to the Tigers. They were (a) surrender of arms, (b) giving up their struggle for self-determination and accepting the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka, (c) renouncing violence against other citizens, (meaning the EPRLF paramilitaries). In the letter, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi had also requested clarifications from the Sri Lankan President on the issues he raised.

The Colombo peace talks on 2nd July between the Sri Lanka government delegation and the LTTE concentrated on the controversial letter written by the Indian leader. Responding to the queries raised and the demands stipulated by Rajiv, the LTTE delegates expressed regret that India had ignored and trivialised the bi-lateral cessation of hostilities declared by Sri Lanka and the LTTE. Mr. Gandhi’s claim that the Accord had ensured an effective cessation of hostilities between the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE guerrillas was factually wrong and misleading, the Tigers argued. The truce envisaged in the Accord had not been effectively implemented. There had been several clashes between the Sri Lankan troops and the LTTE fighters there were considerable casualties on the Sri Lankan side. The Indian armed forces had miserably

²Adele Ann. ‘Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers’ 1993. Thasan Press 1993. Chapter One Historical Background’ Page 1.

failed to contain such violence though they undertook the responsibility of supervising peace between the parties in conflict.

Insofar as a cease-fire between the IPKF and the LTTE was concerned, Mr. Gandhi had stipulated two conditions, the Tiger delegates argued. One was that the LTTE should resume surrendering arms and the second was that it should renounce violence against all other citizens of the Northeast. The disarming task of the IPKF was a total failure. The very de-commissioning process transformed into a bloody war; into a protracted war and the IPKF turned into a killing machine and thousands of innocent Tamils perished in the process. Since the peace talks had been initiated by the Sri Lankan President, a dramatically new situation had arisen and India should face that objective reality. The negotiations between the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE were taking place unconditionally without the obligatory constraints of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. The question of possession or de-possession of arms was now an issue between Sri Lanka and the LTTE and had to be resolved through the negotiations between the parties in conflict. Therefore, the LTTE delegates suggested that the Sri Lanka Government should impress upon India that the question of the responsibility of resolving the issue of arms lay with the Government of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the Tiger delegates urged the Government to register strong protests with Delhi over the building up of a powerful military machine in the name of Tamil National Army. Under the cover of a disarming process the IPKF was actively involved in a massive militarisation programme in the Northeast, the Tigers charged. With regard to the second demand, the LTTE was prepared to extend the cease-fire to 'all citizens of the Northeast if India gave a guarantee that the IPKF and its quisling armed groups cease violence against the Tigers', the LTTE delegates said. The Tigers were also prepared to enter to the democratic political process. But it was only possible if the Indian armed forces, occupying the Tamil homeland, were totally withdrawn, the Tigers declared. The government delegation assured the LTTE that President Premadasa would take up the issues raised by the LTTE with the Indian Prime Minister.

In his letter 4th July, Mr. Premadasa categorically told Mr. Rajiv Gandhi that it was the sole responsibility of the Sri Lanka government to provide safety and security for all citizens within Sri Lanka and that the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord did not give any mandate to India for protective powers over Sri Lankan citizens. Arguing that India had failed to disarm the LTTE for the last two years, Mr. Premadasa pointed out that the Tigers were involved in political negotiations with Sri Lanka and would give up their weapons once the Indian armed forces were withdrawn. Any claim of mandatory role for the government of India or its armed forces within Sri Lanka under the Accord, Premadasa warned, would constitute a 'serious interference in the internal affairs of a friendly sovereign country'.³

The hostile tone and content of the letter indicated that Mr. Premadasa had taken a confrontationist course with Rajiv's administration in seeking the withdrawal of the Indian armed forces from Sri Lanka. Mr. Gandhi also adopted an equally antagonistic position. Responding to the Sri Lankan leader, Gandhi, in his letter of 11th July, reminded Mr. Premadasa that there was a signed agreement between the two countries and India had obligations under the

³Ibid. Page iv.

Accord as a guarantor to ensure the safety and security of the people of the North-east. He also criticised Sri Lanka for not implementing the devolution to the Northeast council as promised. Insofar as the withdrawal of the Indian forces was concerned, Mr. Gandhi reiterated that the withdrawal schedule should be worked out through joint discussions along with 'a simultaneous schedule for the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord'.⁴ In the concluding paragraph of the letter, Mr. Gandhi took a swipe at Mr. Premadasa for making public all correspondence between them in violation of the standard diplomatic practice of 'maintaining confidentiality of official correspondence between Heads of State'.⁵

Rajiv's obstinacy and his uncompromising attitude made Premadasa furious. He realised that writing letters to the Indian Prime Minister and urging him to withdraw the Indian forces was of no avail. In desperation Mr. Premadasa adopted another strategy. Assuming the role of the supreme commander of all the forces in the island, including the IPKF, Mr. Premadasa issued an ultimatum to the officer commanding the IPKF Lt. Gen. Kalkat, demanding that the Indian forces should be withdrawn by the end of July or ordered to barracks. This ultimatum in the form of a legal document was delivered to Lt. Gen. Kalkat on 23rd July at Trincomalee. In response, Gen. Kalkat had sent a warning to Premadasa that the IPKF would be forced to take offensive action if Sri Lankan forces came out of their barracks. Thus Mr. Premadasa's brinkmanship strategy did not work.

Request for Armed Assistance

Following Premadasa's ultimatum, the Indian armed forces intensified their offensive operations against the Tiger guerrillas in the Northern Mullaitivu jungles. In another move, the EPRLF leader Varatharaja Peramul announced that the Tamil National Army would commence operations against the LTTE along with the IPKF. He also declared that he would declare a separate state of 'Eelam' if Premadasa's administration failed to implement the obligations of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. It was these critical developments which formed the backdrop to Bala requesting Mr. Hameed for an urgent meeting in his hotel room to discuss the possibility of armed assistance from the government for the LTTE to face the military threat posed by the Indian forces and the Tamil National Army. Mr. Hameed came to our room around 9p.m on that day and relaxed in the lounge chair as usual, puffing his long Cuban cigar, listening patiently to what Bala had to say. It was a delicate subject and dangerously controversial too. Using both Tamil and English Bala explained the reality and the gravity of the ground situation, particularly in the Mullaitivu theatre of war. The LTTE was running out of ammunition and the IPKF had inducted heavy concentrations of combat troops along with contingents of Tamil paramilitaries in the jungles of Mullaitivu, Bala told Mr. Hameed. Angered by Mr. Premadasa's aggressive diplomacy the Indian army and the Tamil mercenaries were determined to destroy the Tamil Tiger guerrillas and their leadership. The exposing of

⁴Coomaraswamy, Radhika. LTTE Women Is This Liberation The Sunday Times January 5th 1997.

⁵Lemkin, Raphael. Chapter IX 'Genocide' in 'Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation'. Washington, D.C. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944. Page 79.

atrocities by the IPKF during the Colombo talks and the demand for their withdrawal by the Sri Lankan President had seriously embarrassed Delhi and their fury was now turned against the LTTE. Was it possible for Mr. Premadasa, asked Bala, to provide arms and ammunition to the LTTE to defend themselves against the current joint assault by the IPKF and the Tamil National Army?

Mr. Hameed reflected deeply and said that it was a serious and delicate matter. Even if Premadasa decided to help the LTTE, the Sri Lankan military establishment might oppose it, Mr. Hameed cautiously observed. Mr. Premadasa's commitment to securing the withdrawal of the IPKF would never be realised if the LTTE, the only patriotic force that was resisting external occupation, were decimated, Bala pointed out. Finally, after a lengthy discussion Mr. Hameed agreed to convey our request to the President. The following night, Mr. Hameed came along with General Attygalle, the Defense Secretary, to our hotel. They told Bala that the President was willing to help. Since the matter was very sensitive and controversial it had to be handled with extreme confidentiality. The army would be outraged. But it could be done covertly, the General said. Attygalle wanted a list of requirements. Bala and Yogi contacted Mr. Pirabakaran through our communication channel and produced a list of weapons. Within a week, a substantial quantity of arms and ammunition was delivered to the Tigers through a bordering Sri Lankan army camp in Manal Aru (Welioya) sector in the Mullaitivu district.

As the D-Day (end of July 1989) for the withdrawal of the IPKF as demanded by Mr. Premadasa approached, there was a realisation in Colombo that the evacuation of the Indian forces could only be secured by mutual deliberations as Delhi wanted, rather than by threats and ultimatums. Premadasa swallowed his pride and yielded to the notion of negotiations with Rajiv's administration. Subsequently, a powerful Sri Lankan delegation consisting of Mr. Ranjan Wijeratne, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. A C S Hameed, Minister of Higher Education, Mr. Bernard Tilakaratna, Foreign Secretary, Dr. Stanley Kalpage, Sri Lankan High Commissioner in India, Mr. Bradman Weerakoon, Presidential Advisor on International Affairs, Mr. Sunil De Silva, Attorney General, Mr. W T Jayasinghe, Secretary to the Cabinet and Mr. Felix Dias Abeysinghe, Secretary to the Committee for Peace, was dispatched to Delhi on 29th July. The Sri Lankan delegation had several meetings with the Indian Prime Minister, Mr. P V Narasimha Rao, the Minister of External Affairs and Mr. K C Pant, Minister of Defence. The discussion concluded on August 4th. The Indian and Sri Lankan delegations discussed four main issues. Firstly, the preparations of a schedule for the withdrawal of the IPKF from Sri Lanka. Secondly, the cessation of military operations against the LTTE. Thirdly, a review of the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lankan Agreement, and fourthly, the safety and security of all citizens of the Northeastern Province.

After the successful deliberations in Delhi the Government of India agreed to withdraw the IPKF stage by stage in accordance with a schedule. India assured the Sri Lankans that every effort would be made to accelerate the de-induction process of the IPKF to be fully completed by 31st December - which was still after the SAARC meeting. Delhi also agreed to suspend offensive military operations by the IPKF from 20th September. The Sri Lankan side promised that steps would be taken for the expeditious implementation of the devolution

process facilitating effective functioning of the North Eastern Provincial Council. Both the parties decided to set up a 'Security Co-ordination Group' comprising of the Sri Lankan Minister for Defence, the Sri Lankan Defence Secretary, and the Commander of the IPKF and the Chief Minister of the North Eastern Provincial Council. This group would be in-charge of the law and order in the Northeast ensuring the safety and security of all citizens in the province.

Mr. Premadasa was pleased with the agreement between Delhi and Colombo. During a private meeting at his residence, the President told us that he emerged triumphant in the diplomatic tug of war with Rajiv Gandhi and that the fate of the IPKF was sealed. Though the Sri Lankans had pledged to enhance EPRLF's Provincial administration with more devolutionary power, Mr. Premadasa had his own scheme of things. The LTTE team was also pleased since their political strategy of securing the withdrawal of the IPKF from the Tamil homeland had now become a reality.

Having secured an agreement with the Government of India ensuring the phased withdrawal of the Indian forces within a schedule, Mr. Premadasa was now confronted with the critical dilemma of how to fill the political space once the IPKF left the Tamil homeland. Though he pledged to Gandhi that Perumal's Provincial administration would be reinforced and consolidated with adequate devolutionary powers and a police system, Premadasa was well aware that the EPRLF's regime would vanish into thin air when the Tigers marched out of their jungle hide-outs into the urban centres to fill the vacuum left by the Indians. Though he admired LTTE's courage, determination and devotion to a cause, he was fiercely opposed to the Tamil demand for a homeland and self-determination. As the withdrawal of the Indian troops commenced, Mr. Premadasa's ideas and schemes became very transparent. In private sessions Mr. Premadasa emphasized that a permanent solution to the ethnic conflict could only be found within the unitary constitution of Sri Lanka. Since the Indians started leaving the island the time had come for the LTTE to take practical measures to enter into the political mainstream, he said. With the overwhelming support of the Tamil people, the LTTE could sweep to power in the Northeast through elections. He advised the LTTE delegates to form a political party and register it with the Elections Commission.

LTTE's Political Party

Mr. Hameed also told Bala during his private sessions, that Mr. Premadasa had become suspicious of the LTTE's ultimate intentions. Some Ministers had cautioned the President that the LTTE would not seek a solution within the constitutional structure, but was committed to the creation of an independent Tamil state, Mr. Hameed said. Mr. Hameed advised us that it would enhance the image of the LTTE, both locally and internationally, if the Tigers stood for the Northeastern Provincial Council elections and won. Unless the LTTE leadership agreed to this scheme it would be extremely difficult for the President to dissolve Perumal's administration and pave the way for the transfer of power to the Tigers. Bala

told Mr. Hameed that the LTTE leadership was favourably disposed to the idea of forming a political party. The Tigers were also willing to participate in the Provincial elections to prove to the Sinhala majority as well as the international community that they were the sole and authentic representatives of the Tamil people, Bala said. He also told Mr. Hameed that the LTTE was also suspicious of the ultimate intentions of the Premadasa administration. He queried as to whether Mr. Premadasa would be able to dissolve the North eastern Provincial Council, withdraw the Sixth Amendment to the constitution, confine the armed forces to the barracks and allow a peaceful transition of power to the LTTE. Mr. Hameed's response was positive. He said that Mr. Premadasa could be convinced if we were prepared to enter the democratic political mainstream.

Bala had already sought the approval of Mr. Pirabakaran and other leaders when we visited the LTTE's jungle headquarters in Mullaitivu for the formation of a political party. Having spoken again to Mr. Pirabakaran through our communication network, Bala got the endorsement for the name of the party and the office bearers. All that remained was to write the party constitution. Drawing on his previous studies of political party constitutions, Bala drafted the document while I helped him with the editing and typing. The political party was named the People's Front of Liberation Tigers (PFLT). Mr. Mahendraraja (Mathaya) Deputy Leader of the LTTE was given the role of the President of the party and Mr. Yogaratnam Yogi was made the Secretary General. The constitution provided the basis for a genuine democratic party allowing for the representation and participation of all sectors of the populace. A copy of the constitution was handed over to the Election Commissioner for registration. He registered the party and reluctantly approved after consulting the President- the Tiger emblem as the symbol of the People's Front of Liberation Tigers.

Mr. Premadasa was very pleased that the LTTE had formed a new political party indicating their willingness to enter the political mainstream. He urged the LTTE delegates to participate at the All- Party Conference he planned to hold to discuss various issues facing the country as a whole. It was also a move to bring the LTTE into an open political forum as a registered political party to demonstrate to the country a significant political outcome of the peace talks. The LTTE delegates agreed to participate in the inaugural meeting as 'observers'. The All-Party Conference was convened on 12th August with around one hundred delegates from twenty-six political parties. Mr. Yogaratnam Yogi, as the representative of the PFLT, attended the conference as an 'observer'. Mr. Premadasa's inaugural speech dealt with his vision of conflict resolution providing an exposition of his famous three 'C's. The conference discussed all issues apart from the main issue - the ethnic conflict and soon fizzled out as a result of a distinct lack of consultation, compromise and consensus.

As pledged in the joint agreement between Rajiv's administration and Premadasa, the de-induction of the IPKF started in early October 1989. It was a slow process. When the Indian troops began to pullout in stages, district by district, the Tamil National Army occupied their camps and consolidated its positions. Firstly, the Indian army vacated their positions in Amparai and Batticaloa in the Eastern Province. Panicked and confused by the possibility of a major offensive assault by the LTTE on Tamil National Army (TNA) positions in the Eastern

Province, Perumal's administration escalated its ruthless policy of mass conscription. EPRLF cadres forcefully picked up every able bodied young man in the streets, from their homes and schools in a bid to boost the manpower of its militia with the aim of protecting its fragile, teetering regime. This desperate move by the EPRLF to cling onto power by unnecessarily sacrificing a large number of untrained recruits with no combat experience earned Perumal the wrath of the Tamil people. The LTTE leadership was placed in a very delicate situation. Hoping to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, Mr. Pirabakaran sent an urgent message to the Sri Lankan President through Bala that the Sinhala armed forces should not get involved in the confrontation between the LTTE and the TNA. He also announced an amnesty to all the armed cadres of the TNA if they surrendered. Following this, in the early part of November 1989, the LTTE guerrilla forces swept across the Eastern Province, first in Amparai and in the following weeks into Batticaloa, over-running with ease all the military bases of the TNA. Thousands of young TNA recruits surrendered to the advancing columns of Tiger fighters. Only the hard core EPRLF cadres resisted. All those who had surrendered were immediately released to their relieved parents in the Eastern districts. Some of those who surrendered joined the LTTE.

With the collapse of the Provincial administration in the East, Mr. Perumal made desperate appeals to Mr. Gandhi and Mr. Premadasa to intervene and prevent the LTTE guerrillas from taking over the administration in the districts vacated by the Indian army. Faced with a general election and charges of corruption in the Bofors scandal, Mr. Gandhi preferred not to act on Perumal's request. Although Mr. Premadasa was aware of the situation, he was more concerned about the delay in the withdrawal process. He suspected that the delay in the de-induction of the IPKF was a calculated move by Delhi to allow space for Perumal to regroup and re-organise and to consolidate his crumbling military machine.

Having dislodged the Tamil National Army from the Amparai and Batticaloa districts, the LTTE set about consolidating its authority in the area. Bala, Yogi and myself flew by Airforce helicopter to Batticaloa town to participate in the national Heroes' Day. Mr. Pirabakaran had sanctioned 27th November as a national day to honour the martyred LTTE cadres and 1989 was the first anniversary occasion. Chosen in commemoration of Shankar, the first LTTE cadre to die in the struggle, Heroes' Day has become the most important day on the LTTE national calendar. Since its inception in 1989, Heroes' Day has been expanded from a one day function to cover a period of one week of events culminating at 6p.m on the 27th November with families gathering at the war memorial cemeteries and the chiming of bells across the territory.

To celebrate this day of national upsurge we set off from Batticaloa to travel to Pottuvil in the Amparai district. On the route to Amparai, the people's relief and joy that the Indian troops had vacated the district was apparent. Ecstatic crowds flagged down our convoy of vehicles and garlanded the LTTE cadres and our journey ended up taking twice as long as we had planned. As we travelled through the area, people rushed out of their houses congratulating us and expressing their appreciation that the negotiations had finally succeeded in getting the Indian troops out of their homeland. Throughout Amparai, from one town to the next,

were dotted memorial shrines and the red and yellow of the LTTE flag fluttered, and groups of people gathered to celebrate Heroes' Day. Large crowds turned out to hear the LTTE leaders tell them the struggle for their rights was not over and would continue on a different level. In Akkarapattu and Thirukovil on the Eastern coast near Batticaloa town, school children left their class rooms and raced to join the large crowd waiting to see and listen to the LTTE cadres and their leaders. People queued at the meeting places hoping for an opportunity to express their appreciation by garlanding the LTTE cadres with jasmine flowers.

During our private sessions with Mr. Premadasa, he expressed a genuine desire to meet the LTTE leader Mr. Pirabakaran. He told us that none of the Sinhala leaders had ever met the man and therefore held distorted views about the Tiger leader. He said he wanted to talk to Pirabakaran to understand him in depth and establish a working rapport with him. In his vision, personal relationships based on empathic understanding were crucial in politics. Mr. Premadasa admired Pirabakaran for his military ability and his courage and determination to confront formidable forces. He wondered how a young boy from humble origins rose to become a popular, legendary guerrilla leader. To his disappointment, we had to impress upon the President that Mr. Pirabakaran could not come to Colombo for security reasons. When we were in the Mullaitivu base camp Bala told Pirabakaran that Mr. Premadasa was very keen to meet him. Pirabakaran suggested that we should take Mr. Mahendraraja, his deputy, on our next trip to Colombo and introduce him to the President. It was for that reason Mathaya came to Colombo in December 1989 and met Mr. Premadasa in his private sessions. Kittu also came to Colombo, but for a very different reason.

In early October, we made our second visit to the Mullaitivu jungles to meet and consult with Mr. Pirabakaran. During the course of the visit, Mr. Pirabakaran conveyed to Bala his wish to send Kittu to London for treatment for his amputated leg. On hearing of the decision to send him abroad, Kittu was obviously of two minds. Undeniably he aspired for a suitable prosthesis to be fitted which would help him with his walking and mobility. But he was a man emotionally attached to his cadres and his homeland and the prospect of separating from them was an obvious source of distress to him. Kittu flourished in the environment where he could teach his cadres and encourage them with their interests and he often initiated new projects for them to engage in. And so, as the day for his departure grew nearer, he became quieter; as did many of his cadres. And I think one of the most pitiful sights I can remember seeing is this legendary guerrilla fighter crying on Mr. Pirabakaran's shoulder the day we were to take him out of the Alampil jungle. His cadres carried him in a chair on their shoulders - in similar fashion to the manner they had carried Bala earlier - to the waiting helicopter. In classic Kittu style, he put on a brave face for his cadres during the trek out of the jungle, expressing his affection for them in the jokes he was cracking.

Soon after his arrival in Colombo, we escorted Kittu to the British High Commission. After discussions with the British Ambassador, Kittu's entry visa to the United Kingdom was authorised. But Kittu had one serious matter to attend to before his departure to London. When Kittu went to the Mullaitivu jungles after being released from IPKF custody, he became separated from his medical student girlfriend, Cynthia. Now he was anxious to be reunited with

her. On his request she travelled from Jaffna to Colombo to meet him. Shortly afterwards they decided to marry. Kittu's mother rushed from Valvettiturai to Colombo to attend the ceremony. Cynthia's parents were already in Colombo. And so, on October 25th in one of the rooms of the hotel where the LTTE team was accommodated during the talks, the registration of the marriage of Kittu and Cynthia took place. A few days later Kittu flew to London and Cynthia joined him after travel arrangements were made.

Meeting Karunanidhi in Chennai

In India's December 1989 general elections, the Congress party was defeated and Rajiv Gandhi stepped down. Mr. V P Singh became the new Prime Minister. For V P Singh's administration, Rajiv Gandhi's involvement in Sri Lanka was a serious diplomatic disaster. Mr. Singh was anxious not to perpetuate the legacy of Rajiv's blunder, but rather wanted to establish good relations with Sri Lanka and other neighbouring nations. Realising that there was a deliberate delay in the process of de-induction of the IPKF, Mr. Singh ordered the Indian troops to pullout before 31st March 1990. This development signalled the accelerated demise of the collapsing Provincial administration of the EPRLF. Panicked by this turn of events, Mr. Perumal dashed to Delhi and Chennai (Madras) to plead with the Indian leaders not to withdraw the Indian army from Sri Lanka. The new Prime Minister, Mr. Singh, who wanted to adopt a non-interventionist, friendly relationship with Sri Lanka, rejected Mr. Perumal's request. Finding no sympathy in the new administration, the EPRLF leader rushed to Tamil Nadu and urged the Chief Minister Mr. M Karunanidhi to help him to protect his Provincial administration. Mr. Karunanidhi, who was openly critical of the behaviour of the Indian army against the Eelam Tamils, advised Perumal to enter into an agreement with the LTTE and hand over the Provincial administration of the Northeast to the Tigers. Perumal begged Mr. Karunanidhi to play the role of mediator and work out a settlement. It was in these circumstances Bala received an urgent telephone call in the hotel room from the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Mr. Karunanidhi - who Bala had known personally during our stay in Tamil Nadu urging him to come to Chennai as soon as possible. He did not disclose what the matter was, but only hinted that it was very urgent and important. Bala could not refuse the request from the powerful Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and agreed to go. Having obtained permission from Mr. Pirabakaran and Mr. Premadasa, Bala, myself and Yogi flew to Chennai within a couple of days.

In Chennai we were accommodated at the Port Trust Guest House amidst tight security. The Chief Minister and his nephew Mr. Murasoli Maran visited us three times during our stay. Mr. Karunanidhi enquired whether or not the LTTE would share power with the EPRLF if the Northeastern Provincial Council were reconstituted. He said that the EPRLF leadership was prepared to offer half the seats of the Council, paving the way for equal participation of the Tigers in the Northeastern Provincial administration. Bala explained to the Chief Minister that the LTTE was prepared to face fresh elections and it should be the people of Tamil Eelam who had to choose their representatives. He gave a detailed picture to Mr. Karunanidhi about

the brutal crimes committed against the Tamil people by the armed cadres of the EPRLF in collusion with the Indian occupation army. Perumal's administration, Bala argued, was despised by the Eelam Tamils for its misdeeds. EPRLF assumed power through fraudulent elections and functioned as a puppet regime of the IPKF. Because of the intolerable atrocities committed by the Indian army and the EPRLF's paramilitaries, the Tamils wanted the Tigers to assume power. If fresh elections were held in the Tamil homeland, Bala convinced the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, the LTTE would sweep to power. Mr. Karunanidhi finally endorsed LTTE's position and did not press for a joint administration. During the meetings, Bala also gave a detailed assessment of the situation in the Northeast. Mr. Karunanidhi looked deeply perturbed. Apart from the closed-door meetings with the Chief Minister, we also met several LTTE supporters and Tamil Nadu leaders such as Vaiko (Mr. Gopalasamy) and Mr. Veeramany. A press conference was held before we left Chennai at the end of our five-day visit.

By the beginning of 1990 Premadasa's government had effectively suppressed the JVP insurrection in southern Sri Lanka. The war in the North had also come to an end with a stable cease-fire between the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE. The Indian army had ceased its campaign and the de-induction process was accelerated to catch up with the schedule set for the end of March. The LTTE was consolidating in the areas vacated by the IPKF. Sri Lanka was, by and large, stabilised.

The peace talks in Colombo were now confined to private sessions between the President and the LTTE. Mr. Hameed was a regular visitor to our hotel and continued discussions on issues related to a political solution. Since the LTTE had committed itself to participating in the Provincial elections the issues that dominated the discussions were the repeal of the Sixth Amendment to the constitution and the dissolution of Perumal's Provincial administration; two critical issues that had become a bone of contention between the LTTE and the Premadasa regime.

The Sixth Amendment to the 1978 Constitution was an infamous piece of legislation that upholds the unitary structure of the Sri Lanka state and forbids the right to secession. It was promulgated by Jayawardene following the 1983 racial riots to placate the Sinhala-Buddhist extremists. Under this draconian law, anyone who advocates or encourages secessionist politics calling for an independent Tamil state is liable for serious punishment, including the loss of civil rights and forfeiture of property. This legislation requires all elected members of government institutions i.e. Parliament, Provincial Councils, Municipal Councils etc. to provide an oath of allegiance to the unitary state. The LTTE delegates had categorically told Mr. Premadasa and Mr. Hameed that under no circumstances would they take an oath of allegiance to the unitary state. This legislation was oppressive and stifled the fundamental freedom of political choice and expression, the Tigers argued. The LTTE was firmly committed to the principle of selfdetermination; a legal right to which the Tamil people are entitled. The right to self-determination enunciates the freedom of choice of a people to determine their political status, a right that does not preclude secession, the LTTE delegates observed. Unless the Sixth Amendment that forbids the right to choose one's political destiny was repealed the LTTE

would not enter the democratic political mainstream and participate in the elections, the Tigers told Mr. Premadasa.

As a Sinhala nationalist committed to a unitary state, Mr. Premadasa was unhappy with the LTTE demand. Yet at the same time he did not want the peace talks to collapse over this issue. He promised the Tigers that his government would repeal the Sixth Amendment if that were the only alternative left to him to bring the LTTE to democratic politics and solve the ethnic problem. Yet in his heart he knew that repealing the Act was impossible since it required two-thirds majority in Parliament - which he did not have. Furthermore, he knew that the Sinhala-Buddhist forces would be up-in-arms. Mr. Premadasa was in a dilemma. I could see some strains on his face whenever Bala raised the issue of repealing the Sixth Amendment.

The LTTE delegates also insisted that the Northeast Provincial Council should be dissolved without delay, arguing that the EPRLF was not the choice of the Tamil people but was installed by the IPKF as a puppet regime and that it had no legitimacy to run the administration in the Northeast. The Tigers urged Mr. Premadasa to dismiss the Provincial Council and hold fresh elections so that the LTTE could demonstrate its popular support to the world. Mr. Premadasa was reluctant to commit on this issue since he faced serious political and legal problems over the dissolution of the Council. The 13th Amendment had entrenched clauses that prevented the President from dissolving the Provincial Councils at his whim, unless there were specific reasons to do so.

The two issues raised by the LTTE had brought the talks to an impasse, but neither of the parties was inclined to take a confrontationist course. The relationship between the LTTE and Premadasa's administration was warm and friendly. Mr. Hameed ensured that nothing happened between the protagonists that would endanger the newly formed relationship that had been built up with patience and indefatigable effort.

Conference in Vaharai

In the meantime, after quitting Amparai and Batticaloa, the Indian forces withdrew from the Northern districts of Mullaitivu, Vavuniya, Mannar and Killinochchi. A substantial number of Indian troops continued to occupy the Jaffna Peninsula and Trincomalee districts. While the military wing of the LTTE was engaged in overrunning the TNA's positions in the Northern districts vacated by the IPKF, the political wing of the LTTE - the People's Front of Liberation Tigers (PFLT)- began to extend its party structures in the Eastern districts of Batticaloa and Amparai. The inaugural conference of the PFLT was held in the coastal town of Vaharai in the Batticaloa district between 24th February and 1st March 1990. Bala, Yogaratnam Yogi, Murthy, other cadres, and myself went to Batticaloa town by Sri Lanka Air Force helicopter and from there traveled to Vaharai to participate in this historic conference. Senior LTTE political cadres, both men and women, were flown in from all the districts of the Northeast and assembled in Vaharai, a place famous for its natural beauty and tranquillity.

Relieved that the war with India was finally over and the Indian troops were on their way out of the Tamil homeland, the congregated PLFT delegates were in a festive mood. The choice of Vaharai Rest House - ideally located on the white sands overlooking the sea - for the inaugural conference added to the general good spirits amongst the delegates. Deliberations at the conference lasted for one week during which time important resolutions pertaining to crucial national and social issues were passed. On top of the list of resolutions was the commitment to abolish the social injustices and discriminations based on the caste system and the emancipation of women was to be included in the PLFT working program. More specifically, the women delegates demanded that action should be taken to halt the exploitation, suffering and humiliation that women are subjected to as a result of the practice of dowry. A great deal of delegates' attention focused on organising the PLFT throughout the Northeast. It was agreed that steps would be immediately taken to involve and mobilise the people's political participation in the PLFT, and the setting up of party structures from the grassroots village level all the way up to provincial level in every district.

As the final stage of the troop withdrawal of the IPKF approached, Mr. Perumal, as the Chief Minister of the Northeastern Provincial Council made a controversial move. On 1st March he introduced a resolution converting the Northeastern Provincial Council into a Constituent Assembly with an objective of drafting a constitution for an independent sovereign Tamil state to be called Eelam Democratic Republic. This desperate step was perceived in Colombo as an Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). Mr. Premadasa was outraged. But, since the Indian troops were on the verge of leaving Trincomalee district he did not take any action against Perumal. He waited for the completion of the de-induction of the IPKF. On the 24th March, a week earlier than scheduled, the last of the Indian troop contingents left the docks of Trincomalee harbour. Mr. Perumal and other leaders of the EPRLF fled to India with the last of the Indian jawans.

With the departure of the Indian army, the LTTE took control of almost all the districts of the Northeast. The LTTE leadership wanted legitimacy for their administrative control over the Tamil homeland. It was under these circumstances the LTTE delegates met the President and urged him to dissolve the Provincial Council and to hold fresh elections. We told Mr. Premadasa that UDI by Mr. Perumal provided a valid reason for the dissolution of the Council. What was required was an amendment in Parliament, which could have been easily secured by Mr. Premadasa's ruling party. But the President wavered. It was now abundantly clear to the LTTE that Mr. Premadasa was deliberately delaying fulfilling his promises. Mr. Premadasa was only too aware that if fresh elections were held, the Tigers would be swept to power and install a legitimate administration in the Tamil homeland. Mr. Premadasa feared that such an eventuality would provide the LTTE with international legitimacy and would encourage it to seek more powers of self-government.

LTTE's Strategy and Premadasa's Agenda

During these times I enquired from Bala in private conversations as to whether it was against the committed policy of the LTTE to seek an alternative to political independence and statehood. Bala replied that there was no contradiction in the LTTE's political strategy. He explained to me that the ultimate objective of the LTTE was the creation of an independent state based on the right to self-determination of the Tamils when all possible alternatives for coexistence with the Sinhala people were experimented and failed. He said that the LTTE was deadly serious about facing the Provincial Council elections in the Northeast if Premadasa cleared the hurdles i.e. dissolving the Council, repealing the Sixth Amendment and holding fresh elections. For the LTTE, it was a radical experiment to test the feasibility of co-existence. By seeking this alternative, the LTTE would not lose anything. If the Tigers won the elections they would transform the concepts of Tamil homeland and Tamil nationhood into concrete realities, which were their declared political ideals, Bala clarified. Mr. Premadasa had a different agenda, a scheme of his own for tackling the LTTE. Accordingly, he delayed the dissolution of the Council and postponed the prospects of a fresh election. He showed little inclination on the crucial issue of repealing the Sixth Amendment, arguing that securing a two-thirds majority in Parliament would be an impossible task. Ultimately, the private sessions with Premadasa now served little purpose in practical politics. With great patience we listened to his lengthy sermons on one people and one nation where all communities could live in peace and harmony under the tripartite principles of his famous three 'C's.

Mr. Premadasa's secret agenda began to reveal itself when Mr. Hammed paid a visit to our hotel room for a private session with Bala and opened a discussion on de-commissioning the LTTE. It was a very hot day in mid-May. The discussion also reached high temperature, as the subject of the discussions was very sensitive. Mr. Hameed said that he was articulating the concerns and anxieties of the President. "Mr. Premadasa wants free and fair elections in which all parties and groups, including the EPRLF should be given the opportunity to participate in the elections. This is not possible as long as the LTTE possesses arms and is exerting a dominant position in the Northeast. Therefore, the surrender of arms by the LTTE is a necessary factor to hold fresh elections. This is the view of the President and also some Ministers, particularly Ranjan Wijeratne", Mr. Hameed said softly but firmly. Bala enquired as to why the President did not raise the issue of arms when he met the LTTE delegates during his private sessions. Bala also complained that since the departure of the IPKF Mr. Premadasa was holding private sessions with other Tamil groups hostile to the LTTE. He explained to Mr. Hameed that the possession of arms should be viewed as a crucial element of a security arrangement for the Tamil people in the Northeast. The LTTE would be responsible for this security system if permanent peace was established through a permanent political solution. To maintain this security system and law and order, the LTTE should have trained security personnel possessing arms. The LTTE had the manpower, materials and experience to provide an effective security system for the Tamil people, Bala told the perplexed chief negotiator. "It is premature to raise the issue of de-commissioning of the LTTE when your President is not prepared to remove the obstacles for the fresh elections, i.e. dissolving

the Council and repealing the Sixth amendment. Furthermore, the Provincial Council itself is not a sound basis for a permanent solution. The LTTE decided to face the Provincial elections as an interim arrangement, not as a permanent solution. We wanted peace and harmonious co-existence with the Sinhala people. We wanted to create democratic institutions and participate in democratic political practices. We will co-operate with the Government to hold free and fair elections providing the opportunity for all groups and parties to participate in the elections. Once we become the elected representatives of the people, we can negotiate for a permanent solution that will involve the crucial issue of a security arrangement for the Tamil people”, Bala explained. Mr. Hameed suggested the formation of a Provincial police system as an element of the Provincial administrative structure transforming the guerrillas into police officers. “Even if that were possible, the LTTE would need more men and more arms to raise a police force of ten thousand men for the Northeast”, Bala said. In that case, Bala told Mr. Hammed sarcastically, the President had to provide even more arms to the LTTE police force. Thus, the discussion that started out on the issue of disarming the LTTE ended with the notion of re-arming the Tigers. Mr. Hameed looked dejected when he left our hotel room.

We knew that Mr. Premadasa was on a confrontationist course. He was not favourably disposed to the idea of repealing the Sixth Amendment that would relax the rigid constitutional hold on the unitary status of the Sri Lankan state. Premadasa favoured a solution within the unitary state model. As a strong nationalist he was opposed to any alternative models to the unitary polity. Having crushed the JVP rebellion and secured the withdrawal of the Indian troops, Premadasa faced a new dilemma. How to deal with the LTTE. It was still possible to embrace them peacefully in the democratic political mainstream for which he had to repeal the infamous Sixth Amendment. The other alternative was confrontation: military suppression of the LTTE. His hardline Ministers and the military establishment favoured the latter. And he was yielding to their pressure.

Discussing various options, Mr. Premadasa had before him at that critical juncture, Mr. Bradman Weerakoon, a close confidante and advisor to the President commented, “His fourth and final option could have been straight out of Machiavelli or more likely in his idiom, Kautilya - that was, that after the IPKF was out of the way and out of the country, he would turn the refreshed and renewed Sri Lankan forces on the weary LTTE, rout them completely, eliminate Pirabakaran and re-establish law and order, good governance, peace and prosperity’ over the Northeast and the whole of Sri Lanka. I am inclined to think that in his final grand design this last option would have been very appealing”.⁶

As Weerakoon aptly perceived, Mr. Premadasa chose the military option of eliminating the LTTE. Yet he did it in a devious manner as if the LTTE had broken the negotiations and started the war. Without any warning he authorised the Sri Lankan armed forces, hitherto confined to barracks in the Northeast since July 1987, to move freely about and assert the authority of the state. The army high command, confident after recent victories against the JVP rebels, adopted a belligerent attitude and confronted the LTTE. Several incidents

⁶Coomaraswamy, Radhika. LTTE Women Is This Liberation’ The Sunday Times January 5th 1997.

occurred, particularly in the East, which violated the ceasefire agreement and provoked the LTTE beyond patience.

By the end of May 1990, fresh contingents of troops and additional police were moved to the Eastern districts to strengthen and fortify military bases and police stations. As the troops began to intensify patrolling in the cities and towns, tension mounted between the Sinhala armed forces and the LTTE fighters. There were several ugly incidents of military harassment of our guerrilla fighters. An incident occurred near an army camp in Batticaloa where two senior LTTE cadres were disarmed by army personnel and forced to kneel on the tar road in the scorching sun for several hours. There was a massive crowd watching. Unable to withstand the humiliation, one of the fighters swallowed cyanide and died on the spot. The soldiers beat the other fighter unconscious. As the incidents of harassment and persecution increased, the Tiger leadership realised that the Sri Lankan armed forces were deliberately provoking them to cause a confrontation. The desperate attempts made by Bala - who was in Colombo at the time - to impress upon the President to restrain the government forces was of no avail. We learned later from Mr. Hameed, that Mr. Premadasa had given orders to the military high command to systematically fill the vacuum created by the departure of the IPKF. His instructions were to take full control of the Eastern districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai to be followed by the Northern region. Premadasa was well aware that Eelam WarII was inevitable and he prepared the armed forces for that eventuality.

The straw that broke the camel's back was a minor incident of harassment of a Muslim woman in the Batticaloa police station on 10th June. The LTTE's interference by questioning the police behaviour - led to an armed confrontation between the LTTE fighters and the police. The fighting that erupted between the Tigers and the police escalated into a wider conflagration between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces in the Tamil areas of the Northeast. A full-fledged war had resumed. In a desperate last minute effort to secure a cessation of hostilities, Mr. Hameed flew to Jaffna on 11th June. I went along with Bala and other cadres to receive Mr. Hameed outside the Pallaly Air Base. Before Mr. Hameed reached the point of rendezvous some undisciplined Sri Lankan soldiers opposed to peace fired at his vehicle. Nevertheless, Mr. Hameed met Mr. Pirabakaran and other LTTE leaders. His efforts to arrange a truce ended in fiasco since the Sri Lankan forces in the Eastern districts were determined to prosecute the war. Apart from Mr. Hameed, the President and his hardline Ministers were not inclined towards peace. As the war resumed with brutal intensity, Mr. Ranjan Wijeratne, the Deputy Minister of Defence thundered in Parliament "Now I am going all out for the LTTE. We will annihilate them".⁷ Thus ended the ill-fated negotiations between the LTTE and Premadasa administration.

⁷'Suthunthira Paravaikal' May-June 1991.

7 Living amid War in Jaffna

With the departure of the Indian troops from Sri Lanka in March 1990, the LTTE marched into Jaffna in strength, overran the EPRLF's military camp in Maniyanthodamm, Ariyalai and assumed total control of the Peninsula. The Sri Lankan armed forces were confined in three strategic locations - the Jaffna Fort, Pallaly Air Base and in Elephant Pass. Taking a break from the peace talks in Colombo, we arrived in Jaffna at the end of March and found temporary accommodation in a house in Valvettiturai. In Jaffna city and elsewhere in the Peninsula, we could see people greatly relieved at the IPKF's withdrawal and overjoyed at their newfound freedom. After two years of war and military occupation by a foreign army the Jaffna people were putting their lives back together again and a sense of normalcy and tranquillity prevailed. The goodwill of the people and their enthusiastic support for the LTTE was demonstrated in their mass participation at Poopathy Amma's ¹ memorial meeting at Nallur Kandasamy Temple on April 19th. It was a similar situation two weeks later on May 1st. A festive atmosphere characterised the May Day rallies. Tens of thousands of people from all over the Jaffna Peninsula turned out to hear from the LTTE leaders what the future had in store for them. Bala and Yogi briefed the people on the developments in the sensitive talks with the Sri Lankan government. I was also given the opportunity to address the rally on the question of women workers.

We took the interval of peace to get together with many old colleagues and 'catch up' with old friends. Sugi, the leader of the LTTE women's wing, decided to marry her long time boyfriend Grazy. Her wedding at her home in Mandaitivu was a joyous occasion for all the cadres after years without social functions. Bala was also anxious to visit his school friend Mr. Kandasamy

¹Kanapathipillai Poopathy affectionately and reverently known as 'Poopathy Amma' amongst the Tamil people, is one of the most remarkable women in the history of the Tamil freedom struggle. Poopathy Amma was born in the Batticaloa village of Kiran on 3rd November 1932. On 19th March 1988, the fifty six year old grandmother Poopathy Amma staged a fast-to-death at Mahmangam Pillayar temple, demanding an immediate, unconditional cease-fire between the LTTE and the IPKF and unconditional talks between the LTTE and the Indian government. Poopathy Amma's life was one of both personal tragedy and courage. Two of her sons were killed during military operations and round-ups of villages by the Sri Lankan armed forces and another was taken into custody and tortured. She became a vociferous critic of human rights violations by the Sri Lankan armed forces and was a political activist and social worker. She was outraged by the death and mayhem caused by the IPKF during the Indo-LTTE war. When the Indian army banned political activity, Poopathy Amma ignored the orders and organised demonstrations and protests against the IPKF atrocities. When the IPKF harassed fasting women protestors, Poopathy Amma undertook the hunger strike to achieve her political objectives. For thirty days Poopathy Amma refused food and FLUIDS before she succumbed. Her fast-to-death exceeded the duration of Thileepan's struggle in September 1987, about which I have written in Chapter IV.

living in Alvai and reclaim our dog Jimmy, from him. This creature had not forgotten us after two years and ran round and round the compound in joy. We also visited all the families in Vadamarachchi who had taken great risks to assist us during those trying days under pursuit by the Indian army. Sadly, we learned that many cadres who had assisted us when we were underground had been killed during round ups by the Indian army. On inquiries concerning the whereabouts of Kingsley, we were told that after we left Vadamarachchi in 1987, he went to Trincomalee where he was killed in combat.

The euphoria of the Tamil people was short lived. The outbreak of war with Sri Lanka in the second week of June 1990 and the collapse of the peace talks between the LTTE and Premadasa's regime put an end to the congenial atmosphere as well as the hopes and expectations that dominated Jaffna. With the resumption of hostilities, Premadasa's administration adopted harsh policies subjugating the Tamil civilians to extreme hardships. Electricity and telecommunications were cut off plunging Jaffna into darkness and in isolation from the rest of the world. The Sinhala state began to economically strangle the Tamil nation. A stringent economic blockade was imposed causing acute shortages of food and medicine in the North. The absence of electricity and fuel paralysed industries, transport and seriously affected agriculture. Unemployment was rampant and the cost of living became extremely high.

Slowly, the objective conditions of war gripped Jaffna. When the sound of artillery shelling and aerial bombardment returned to the Peninsula, people rushed to clean up their old bunkers or to dig new ones. The proud and ever resilient Jaffna people prepared themselves to face the challenges of the new turn of events.

When the war broke out we were residing near the lighthouse at Munai in Point Pedro. One couldn't have asked for anything closer to paradise than this elegant old house just twenty-five yards off the beach and surrounded by coconut trees. So we were extremely reluctant to abandon it regardless of the danger we were in. Soosai and our bodyguards encouraged us to relocate deeper inside Vadamarachchi. They warned us that the Sri Lankan troops might attempt an amphibious landing on the beach in front of our house. It was only the regular, indiscriminate shelling of coastal fishing villages by patrolling naval gunboats, and the frequent sorties by planes that made us realise the advice to move further inland was prudent.

Our departure from the Point Pedro beach house to another residence in Athiyaddy, Jaffna, marked the beginning of a saga of relocating houses both in the Peninsula and in the Vanni for nearly a decade as we became 'soft' targets for the Sri Lankan Air Force. Some of the houses we occupied received direct hits by bombing. The beautiful old house in Point Pedro was eventually bombed and partially destroyed.

The Battle for Jaffna Fort

The resumption of hostilities between the LTTE and the Sri Lanka government shifted the emphasis away from the politics of peace and dialogue to the war of liberation. The strategy

of liberating occupied territories took the centre stage again.

In Mr. Pirabakaran's analysis, the Fort garrison occupying the heart of Jaffna posed a serious danger to the LTTE administration. Built by the Dutch centuries ago, with security uppermost in their minds, the Fort was situated along the Northern coast of Jaffna in close proximity to the Pannai causeway that linked the Peninsula with the islands of Mandaitivu and Kayts. But apart from its strategically crucial location, the Fort garrison was also serious threat to the lives of civilians living in the Jaffna city. The Sinhala troops manning the Fort regularly launched indiscriminate mortar attacks on civilian areas causing several casualties. The Jaffna General Hospital, just a short distance from the Fort, was also subjected to mortar fire. Terrified patients and staff were regularly compelled to vacate the hospital for safer ground during these attacks. Equally significant was the political symbolism that the Fort represented. For the Tamils, the Fort, built during the period of Dutch colonial domination, stood as a monument to alien occupation of their homeland. For the Sri Lankan state, the military occupation of the Fort symbolised its 'sovereignty' over Jaffna and its population. Therefore, the Tiger leadership had significant political and military interests vested in taking control of the Fort and was fiercely determined to do so. But a direct ground assault on the Fort garrison would have been suicidal. Built as an impenetrable stronghold, surrounded by a deep moat, the Fort was a formidable strong point. Instead, Mr. Pirabakaran opted to lay siege to it. The mechanisms for a siege were set in place amid a deteriorating cease-fire and it began on 18th June 1990, just a week after the outbreak of full-blown hostilities. The LTTE's combat units surrounded the Fort precincts and having taken up positions in well-constructed bunkers, pounded the Fort with mortar bombs. Fifty-calibre anti-aircraft guns were moved closer to the site and the combined firepower was sufficient to effectively cut the helicopter borne delivery of supplies to the besieged soldiers. Surrounded and bombarded by sustained mortar assaults and with the supply lines cut off, the Sinhala troops were brought under severe psychological pressure. Determined to prevent the fall of the Fort, the Premadasa regime undertook a ferocious bombing campaign in Jaffna to support the beleaguered troops. All combat aircraft and helicopter gunships were mobilised for day and night aerial bombardment. The intense aerial bombing and artillery fire (from Pallaly base) blasted not only the surroundings of the Fort, but indiscriminately extended to residential areas in the city. This campaign of blind bombardment caused heavy civilian casualties and eventually destroyed thousands of houses in Jaffna. Many people vacated the area and those who remained behind spent hours in their makeshift underground bunkers. The brief period we spent in Athiyaddy, just a few miles from the Fort, was a nightmare. Helicopter gunships strafed the area day and night. Aerial bombardment was continuous. We lived out each day expecting a bomb to fall on our house at any moment. One day the Jaffna LTTE Commander, Banu, visited our residence and warned us to vacate the house immediately. He told us that the LTTE's military intelligence wing had learned that the Air Force had obtained, through local agents, information on the location of our residence. On his advice, we shifted out of Jaffna and went to live in Vathiri, Vadamarachchi. A few days later we learned that the house in Athiyaddy had been reduced to rubble after receiving a direct hit by a barrel bomb.

After a protracted siege, the Jaffna Fort eventually fell to the LTTE fighters on 26th September,

the anniversary of Thileepan's death. The siege had lasted 107 days. With supply lines effectively cut off, the Sri Lankan troops holed up inside the Fort faced the possibility of slow death by starvation. Finally the Sri Lankan army launched a covert operation at night and secured the withdrawal of the troops through an underground tunnel leading to the Jaffna lagoon shore at the rear of the fortification.

Life in Vadamarachchi

Our return to Vadamarachchi did little to change our uncertain life. Although the ground battles were being fought elsewhere - in the vicinity of Pallaly military complex - Vadamarachchi was subjected to aerial bombardment, helicopter raids and naval shelling. These regular attacks constantly reminded us that we were living under conditions of war. Routine sorties over Vadamarachchi by Air Force planes and helicopter gunships became a terrifying part of people's lives. The appearance in the sky of planes and helicopters sent them fleeing to safety. Those with bunkers snatched up their children and fled to the underground for protection. Less fortunate ones (and there were many) watched the planes circle in the sky for some indication of where the bombing would take place. Apart from high explosive bombs, planes dropped crude homemade barrels of inflammatory material such as tar. An entire family would be wiped out if one of these barrels scored a direct hit on a house. Perilous also, was the barrel bombs randomly dropped as the transport planes passed over Vadamarachchi en route from one place to the other. Disgustingly, the Air Force personnel displayed their racial hatred by dropping barrels of excreta on the Tamil people. The induction of supersonic jets added a new and terrifying dimension to the war against the people. The sound of approaching warplanes and their appearance in the sky as a circling dot was like an omen of death. The screaming noise of diving bombers delivering their lethal cargo was spine-chilling. These indiscriminate bombing raids on civilian areas caused heavy casualties.

Helicopter gunships also played their part in killing, maiming and terrorising people. The strafing of civilians was a sport for the crew of the helicopters. For example, I was visiting some friends living in front of the local Manthikai hospital when we heard a helicopter approach the area. We all knew that a helicopter close by meant trouble was at hand. Everybody became alert in preparation for its attack. Suddenly the sound of automatic machine gun fire rattled through the air. The low flying helicopter was circling the shopping area of Point Pedro town and firing indiscriminately into the civilians. Having finished the 'fun' there, the helicopter approached the hospital. We took cover behind a concrete wall trying to avoid the fifty calibre bullets. After about half an hour of this 'joyride' the helicopter disappeared. Fortunately nobody was injured during this attack. But these frequent helicopter raids made travelling by vehicle or bus a hazardous exercise. It is impossible to recollect the number of times our vehicle took cover under trees to avoid being spotted by helicopters. I can also remember being chased by a helicopter as we crossed Vallai Veli (expanse), the two-mile open road, which links Vadamarachchi to Valigamam in Jaffna. Several civilians lost their lives and many were injured when helicopters strafed and rocketed buses when crossing this area of open space.

Overloaded with passengers, buses were unable to move quickly at the sound of an approaching helicopter and would be caught in the middle of the open road, making them sitting ducks for the airborne crews who seemed to delight in firing at the obvious civilian targets.

The Sri Lankan Navy also played its part in the destruction of Vadamarachchi. Scores of people have been killed and injured and hundreds of concrete houses along the coastal belt of Valvettiturai and Point Pedro been reduced to rubble by systematic naval bombardment. Naval shelling interrupted my Tamil classes at a house in Thumpalai, a few hundred yards from the Point Pedro beach, and compelled my teacher and myself to seek cover in the bunker.

In these circumstances we were forced to live the life of a mole and in every house we occupied the first and the foremost task was to dig out a bunker in the compound. Six feet deep and two feet wide, L shaped with an entrance at the back and front, and covered with huge tree trunks and a pile of sand bags on the top, these dark boltholes provided us safety during our life in the Jaffna Peninsula, and later, in the Vanni. Contributing to our security arrangements was a team of bodyguards living in adjoining houses or in cottages in the compound. The fences surrounding the houses we lived in were raised to seven feet high with iron sheets, giving an appearance of a mini-military camp. Whether we liked it or not, that was the life of LTTE cadres. People could easily identify these 'iyakkam' (Movement) houses from their external appearance.

New Image of Women Cadres

The fall of the Fort to the LTTE ushered in relative security to the residents of the city and surrounding suburbs. We decided to move back into Jaffna to be closer to the political hub of the LTTE. Initially we took a house at Chundukili near the coast. From here Bala had easier access to the LTTE leaders and cadres and it was more convenient for his work. The women cadres also had many political issues to contend with and they often came to see me to discuss these problems. Gayathri, a university student before she joined the LTTE and a senior cadre from the 'Birds of Freedom' group, had taken over as editor of the women's monthly magazine 'Suthanthira Paravaikal'. She was a regular visitor, in search of ideas for the magazine. Jeyanthi was now in charge of the women's military wing and Jeya (who lived with us in Chennai) was the leader of the Women's Front, the political wing of the LTTE women. Jeyanthi and Jeya - both from Vadamarachchi - had been in the first batch of girls to be trained in Tamil Nadu in 1985. Theepa, also from the Chennai days and the first batch of trainees, was a close confidante of Jeyanthi. All three young women were close to us and Jeyanthi often organised days out for us at her bases. Her main base was a huge training centre in Kalally, Thenmarachchi and the other in Polygandy in Vadamarachchi. Bala was often included in these outings to give classes on politics and sociology to the women cadres and to keep them informed of political developments.

But now the entire image of women cadres had fundamentally changed. The rifle carrying women guerrillas of the LTTE in camouflage uniforms who marched into Jaffna after the with-

drawal of the Indians in 1990, represented a radical departure from the casually dressed young women who, two years earlier, had retreated in disarray to the jungles of the Vanni. They were now well trained, combat experienced and confident. It was obvious to the crowds who gathered to see the spectacle of patrols of women contingents, that a new wave had swept through the society and this generated considerable debate. While many admired the sacrifice and commitment of the women fighters, they also felt threatened by the possibility of fundamental change in the role and image of Tamil women and its impact on culture. The perennial debate - tradition versus change- reared its head and centred on the women cadres themselves. For sections of the conservative Jaffna Tamils, the sight of young unmarried Tamil women in military fatigues patrolling the Jaffna streets with rifles, was in stark contrast to the historic image of demure, long- haired Tamil women in saris or dresses, and thus signified a death knell to tradition and a threat to their culture. The debate, nature versus nurture, was thrashed out in common-sense terms in homes everywhere and the battle between tradition and change was often heated. Many viewed the women cadres in the new role as armed freedom fighter as 'unnatural' to women. For them, a woman's destiny was determined by her biology. Not only were they 'weaker' than men, but their essential roles in life were those of bearer and rearer of children. The ramifications of any violation of these pre-ordained roles were far reaching and would disrupt the social order and discipline, so it was argued. Women were the lynchpin in marriage and the family structure and to think or behave otherwise, so the argument went, would herald the demise of the family centred culture. Women, they argued, were respected and treated equally but in their different socio-familial role. A reactionary backlash contested the necessity and relevance of 'women's liberation' to Tamil women and Jaffna society. But, in my conception, these arguments were both misplaced and misrepresented and stemmed largely from the failure to clearly conceptualise what 'women's liberation' meant for Tamil women. While it is true that women's participation in the armed struggle is a radical intervention for women in Tamil society, it has to be borne in mind that military participation is not an end in itself but has wider objectives. In Jaffna society, the wider objectives of women's involvement in the struggle were initially lost and focused on the representation of armed women. Essentially, women in uniform now symbolised the image of 'women's liberation' in Jaffna. Inevitably such an image was not appealing to the wider sections of Tamil women and the public in general. Even greater controversy surfaced when LTTE women took the bold decision to cut their long black hair. Plaited and tied up long hair had been part of the image of LTTE women and a symbolic capitulation to mainstream images of Tamil women. But when LTTE women appeared in society with short-cropped hair, they caused a furore and allegations of attempts to sabotage or destroy the culture were levelled at the women fighters. But the tremendous response by the women cadres to the decision to allow them to wear their hair short, reflected an aspiration amongst women to rid themselves of this time-consuming adornment. But the decision was actually taken based on military considerations. Maintaining long plaited hair was a nuisance for the young women during training and military operations. However, not all the cadres cut their hair. Many liked their hair long and thus kept their locks. Some amongst the women cadres hung onto their hair in the name of 'tradition'. Insofar as I was concerned, the very fact that they had a choice over the matter represented a progressive step for the women.

The women cadres were unfazed by the criticisms levelled against their participation. Single-minded in their commitment, they weathered this storm with great dignity and confidence. Many young women continued to join the struggle and the initial shock this caused to parents eventually faded as they came to terms with a reality they could no longer determine. Women joining the armed struggle became an accepted norm of Tamil society and the culture has not fallen apart as many had expected or warned.

As the military organisation of the LTTE women fighters had now expanded, it began to play a crucial role in the liberation war. This became evident in the battle at Elephant Pass, which started on 10th July 1991. Several units of women fighters took an active role in this major battle and exhibited exceptional courage and heroism. This bloody confrontation between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces lasted twenty-four days. Without conventional weapons and an adequate air defence system and fighting in unfavourable, open terrain the LTTE suffered heavy casualties and eventually made a tactical withdrawal from the battlefield. 573 Tigers were killed including 123 women fighters. Hundreds were injured. Though it was a major military debacle, the LTTE learned through this experience the necessity and importance of developing its forces into a conventional formation. But a most significant aspect of this battle was the unity between the LTTE and the people in preparation for and during this offensive. A major Sri Lankan military installation at the very throat of Jaffna was an obvious source of resentment amongst the people. The prospect that it would be overrun and the people could move freely from the peninsula to the Vanni excited and enthused the population. Support from the people of Jaffna for the LTTE's campaign at Elephant Pass took many forms, from the simple offering of food for the fighting cadres to the supply of transport. My medical experience meant that I was ideally suited to care for the injured cadres and I offered to assist the campaign in this area. Jeyanthi and Jeya set up two medical bases four hundred yards from our house and I was to be responsible for the injured girls who would be warded there. But as I was to learn, caring for war wounds in a makeshift medical set-up is quite a different experience to routine nursing care of surgical and medical patients backed up by a massive health care infrastructure. Treating torn flesh from razor sharp shrapnel is also a contrast to the neat surgical wound of an appendicectomy. The mutilation of an eighteen-year old girl's slim leg by the force of a fifty-calibre bullet has a different impact on one's thinking to that of a fracture of a teenager's leg during routine gymnastic exercises.

Apart from my professional nursing experience, the doctors in the organisation had trained all the young LTTE women medical staff. Nevertheless, with this basic nursing training and minimum medical equipment, the young women coped admirably with the complicated and devastating injuries that came their way. Dozens of young women fighters with serious injuries passed through these medical bases. Many of them cried in pain and their friends with lesser wounds comforted them. The patience of the young women attending to the demands of the injured cadres was infinite. Although not professional in their technique, the care behind the hand that dressed the injuries ensured that infection was kept at a minimum. But while the sight of devastating wounds in young people was enough to provoke reflection in anybody, it was a pleasure to care for these young ladies who were not in anyway demoralised by their experiences or their injuries. We often joked and laughed our way through their pain during

treatment. “If ‘auntie’ touches your wound it will heal” was the standard comment from the injured women. To be fair, I think their rapid healing was more to do with their youth than any skill I had in attending to their wounds. Nevertheless, I was happy that they had confidence in my care for them.

The presence of LTTE women’s medical bases in Chundukili was common knowledge amongst the public. Subsequently, the thought of young ‘daughters of the soil’ lying in bed with injuries received from the battlefield invoked great sympathy from the Jaffna populace and they responded wholeheartedly, demonstrating their concern and solidarity with the women fighters by bringing bedding, young coconuts, cooked food and so on to the medical bases. The Sri Lankan military personnel were also tipped off about the existence of these temporary medical bases in Chundukili. And so, when at around mid morning one day, the Sri Lankan Air Force launched a bombing raid on the bases, I was furious. I had just left the site when the raid took place. I had been to see if any particular problems required attending to. Not more than five minutes after I had left the base and arrived home, an enormous explosion sent me sprawling on the floor. I immediately thought our house had been bombed. I jumped up and fled to the bunker and just as I fell through the doorway, another explosion shook the area. Shock waves brushed my face and burning shrapnel came flying through the bunker door. A short time after the blast our bodyguards came running to tell me the supersonic jets had disappeared and it was safe to come out of the bunker. We were all a little shaken by this close shave and were wondering where the bombs had fallen. It was then I learned that the women’s medical bases had been hit. I rushed to the spot fearing what the extent of the casualties among the injured women might be. Miraculously, apart from a few scratches, none had been injured or killed. They heard the jet circling Jaffna town and rushed to the bunker for cover and were thus able to avoid casualties. But, tragically, one passing civilian woman had her head blown off and died on the spot. Regular bombardment by supersonic jets in the vicinity of our house after the LTTE’s offensive at Elephant Pass led to apprehension that our residence could be targeted. We moved from Chundukili to Kokkuvil where our house was more difficult to spot from the air. We resided there during our remaining years in Jaffna.

The LTTE Administration in Jaffna

The people of Jaffna adapted their lives to the conditions of war and settled down to their normal routine. In the meantime, the LTTE was expanding its military and political wings and other structures of civil administration. The Tigers allowed several of the government institutions to function, except law and order. The state administrative structure the Kachcheri system the departments of education, health, transport, agriculture etc - continued to function as usual with Government funds. The LTTE created a ‘shadow’ administration to monitor and supervise the functions of the central institutions. The Tigers also assimilated civilians with experience and expertise to run their shadow structures. A finance section was established under Mr. Tamilenth, assisted by qualified civilian accountants. An effective taxation system was introduced. Taxes were levied from the class of merchants and middle businessmen.

An Institute of Economic Research and Development that originated before the arrival of the IPKF, was expanded to promote the economic well being of the Tamil people. Finally, a police force and later judicial systems were established to maintain law and order. In other words, the LTTE created an effective de facto state with its headquarters in Jaffna and its branches of administration in all territories under its control in the Northeast. While Mr. Pirabakaran consolidated his administrative control over the North, Mr. Premadasa unleashed his armed forces in the East. The Sri Lankan troops overran the LTTE's positions in the cities and towns in the Eastern coastal region and pushed the Tiger guerrillas back into jungle hideouts.

Nevertheless, since our arrival in Jaffna, the People's Front of Liberation Tigers (PFLT), the political organisation of the LTTE, continued to function with its central office at Kondavil, Jaffna. PFLT branches were opened all over the Peninsula. Apart from law and order and finance, the PFLT controlled all the civil administrative structures. The incorporation of civilians into the PFLT and in the administrative services enhanced the LTTE's image as an organisation of the people. But as time went on, the LTTE's administration in Jaffna came under criticism. The imposition of a pass system to arrest the tide of Tamil youth travelling to Colombo enroute to western countries seeking asylum was an extremely controversial issue. The objective of the LTTE behind the pass system was to stem the exodus of people out of the country preventing a breakdown of the fabric of society. But of course, the LTTE's policy came into conflict with the aspirations of parents who wanted their children to escape from the conditions of war and to seek greener pastures abroad. Another issue that caused controversy and criticism was the ban imposed on Tamil films. The LTTE leadership felt that most Tamil films were a shallow caricature of real life and polluted the consciousness of the people. The people thought otherwise. Many people rightly in my view - were of the opinion that they should not only have the right to choose, but that they were capable of exercising self-censorship in their choice of films. An important consideration also in the controversy surrounding this issue, was the lack of entertainment available to the people. It is only when one is deprived of entertainment facilities does one understand the importance it plays in the wellbeing of human life. The people craved for some form of entertainment in a turbulent life permeated by war and violence. Many civilians visited us and poured out their frustrations. On several issues, we shared their views. But life in Jaffna went on, despite the criticisms. Most people tolerated and forgave the inadequacies of the LTTE administration arguing that they were their children, as well as their freedom fighters. The people sympathetically understood the extreme difficulties faced by the Tigers in waging an all-out war against a modern state and simultaneously running an administration in the controlled territories. Remarkably, with the establishment of a police administration and judicial system, there was a substantial fall in the crime rate in Jaffna. In a radical move, the Tamil Eelam police recruited and trained women police officers with a view to encouraging and opening up greater participation of women in the LTTE administration. With women police officers in the Force, it was argued, women would be encouraged to report persecution and crime perpetrated against them and justice would be administered. Women felt a greater sense of security with women cadres and women police officers on the streets armed with the authority to arrest and punish criminal activity. A notable and admirable facet of the LTTE's administration was the freedom from fear women

experienced when travelling alone, particularly late at night.

The LTTE also, with its limited resources, promoted education. Without interfering with the state education system, an education organisation was set up under Baby Subramaniam (Illam Kumaran) to assist and advance the existing system by introducing into the curriculum new text books on Tamil language, culture and history. The textbooks produced by the Sri Lankan Education Department projected a distorted account of Tamil history and civilisation. Taking this fact into consideration, the LTTE's education organisation published texts highlighting the depth and beauty of the language as well as the authentic history of the Eelam Tamils. The LTTE's enlightened policy on education was well tuned to the sensibilities of the Tamil people's passion for learning and was welcomed by Jaffna society.

Women Fighters

In the meantime, armed confrontations between the Liberation Tigers and the Sri Lankan forces erupted on various fronts and the participation of the women fighters became integral to the war of liberation. The Battle of Elephant Pass, in which women fighters played a crucial role, was followed by a defensive battle in Manal Aru, otherwise known as 'Operation Lightning' (Minal). Units of women fighters who 'manned' the LTTE defence bunkers in the periphery of the Pallaly Air base launched daring operations on the mini-camps of the Sri Lankan army. And as this history of the women's military participation deepened and stories of heroism became known to me, I felt a desire to record, for posterity, some of the astounding situations and experiences these young women had confronted. Time and events were passing by at a rapid pace and if history were not recorded immediately it risked being censored by fading memories, and facts muddled by ever evolving situations. Hence, I decided to write a book to document the history of the women's military wing of the LTTE. Jeyanthi, the women's military wing leader, co-operated fully in this enterprise and willingly made available for interview as many as possible of the women fighters who had participated in the various battles. The women commanders came to our house to discuss the history. I travelled to their camps and conducted interviews. But whereas the book contains extracts from interviews with particular individuals, it was quite an emotional and touching experience to hear and watch them tell their stories in person. Many of them lowered their voices in respect when they referred to the name of one of their martyred friends or colleagues. Some of them became elated when rendering an act of heroism. One or two women found it easier to act out a replay of a difficult situation. Occasionally a women fighter twisted her fingers when she had difficulty in putting a particular experience into words. Many women used the word 'frightened', but none used the word 'flee'. All of them straightened their shoulders when commenting on victory in the battlefield. Some groups of women fighters narrated how they ran gauntlets of falling bombs to reach frontline fighters and provided them with urgently needed ammunition. Other girls stressed the importance of providing regular meals to the fighters even at the cost of their own hunger and thirst. Legends abounded of medical teams risking their lives to attend to and carry injured cadres from the battlefield. Some of the women fighters were proud of their

success in fighting their way out of round ups by contingents of Sri Lankan troops. Stories were told of their friends' premonitions of death that ultimately came true. And as I talked to these young women and they revealed extraordinary and unique incidents and events it was impossible not to feel in awe and honoured in their presence. And so, after being allowed into their lives and having shared their stories with them I was able to comprehend the totality of their experiences, their level of commitment and the depth of their sacrifice. Hence, it is extremely disturbing to read criticisms of LTTE women from people who have absolutely no idea of the subject they are writing about.

Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers was published in Jaffna on 1st January 1993. Later the LTTE International Secretariat published it in London and Paris simultaneously. The work provides a historical sketch of the birth and development of the women's military organisation of the Liberation Tigers. It documents, in some detail, the engagement of the women fighters in various actions in the liberation war. Beginning with the initial induction in the first battle in Mannar in October 1986 and ending with the major assault on the large military complex at Pallaly on 23rd November 1992 the work records a six-year history of the armed struggle of the women fighters of LTTE. In unveiling this history, I have attempted to portray the systematic growth and development of the women's fighting force and its multiple experiences from jungle guerrilla warfare to a more advanced semi-conventional mobile warfare. I have also sketched the significant role played by the women fighters in engaging a formidable military machine - the Indian army in urban and jungle guerrilla warfare that transformed them into an effective fighting force. A chapter of the book deals with recruitment and training of women cadres. The rigorous training provided by the LTTE, I argued, transformed the women cadres into well-disciplined, armed combatants capable of confronting the most difficult and dangerous combat situations.

Historically, the women of Tamil Eelam have been politically conscious and participated actively in the Tamil national struggle for self-determination. They were the active forces in the non-violent political struggles of the sixties and seventies. The women's participation in the armed struggle, I argued in the book, was an extension of their participation in the national struggle for liberation. Furthermore, I explained that the objective and subjective conditions that led to the involvement of women in the armed resistance movement 'have been shaped by specific historical processes of state oppression'.² As the integral part of the national formation and as the direct victims of state oppression, Tamil women volunteered to join the resistance movement since it was a struggle of a people, I argued.

A Reply to the Critics

In the Introduction of the book I have clearly stated that the work was not intended as a theoretical document on feminism. "It is beyond the scope of this text to provide a thorough

²Adele Ann. 'Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers' 1993. Thasan Press 1993. Chapter One Historical Background' Page 1.

exposition of the many feminist issues that women in combat confront. Nevertheless a few feminist problems are briefly touched throughout the text,” I commented.³

Since there is very little written in English about women in the armed struggle of the LTTE my book, in 1993, subsequently became the punch bag for feminist critique of the LTTE women. Undoubtedly there is always a space for criticism in politics. Yet there are two aspects of criticism: negative and positive. Some critics are constructive. They are objective and balanced in their analysis. Such constructive criticisms are useful and have to be welcomed for their positive value since they attempt to reveal the truth of the phenomenon under investigation without bias or prejudice. On the other hand, negative criticism is essentially destructive; it is a negation of objective analysis. They are often erroneous, and have nothing to contribute towards the understanding of the objective reality under investigation. Spearheading the negative assault on Tamil women in armed struggle are some human rights activists and feminists. Either by design, or misfortune, they often constitute the intellectual hub of repressive state machinery whose major concern is to undermine the legitimacy of the Tamil armed resistance as a mode of political struggle. Criticising Tamil women’s participation in the armed struggle is the venue through which they are able to launch a wider attack on the Tamil political struggle in general. Thus, these criticisms also aim to deny women, as an integral part of the oppressed, their right to defend themselves against the threat to their survival.

There are also feminist writers who have written extensive criticisms of LTTE women fighters without adequate knowledge and understanding of the specific historical conditions that led to the participation of Tamil women in armed resistance. Some of them are Sinhalese feminists whose views are prejudiced and trapped in the chauvinistic discourse of the Sinhala establishment. There are also Tamil feminist critics who were born and bred in Colombo and studied abroad and have little or no knowledge of the concrete conditions of repression or resistance in the Tamil homeland. Though learned intellectuals they get their ‘data’ from the distorted literature produced by the Colombo media. These are messianic visionaries who claim to have transcended their Tamil cultural identity for the highest ideals of multi-cultural universe and look upon the Tamil struggle as merely a perverted manifestation of narrow nationalism. One such critic is Radhika Coomaraswamy. In a highly controversial article entitled LTTE Women - Is This Liberation’ published in a Colombo weekly⁴ Ms. Coomaraswamy created a stir among social and political thinkers in Sri Lanka. The controversy stems from her gross misrepresentation of Tamil women in armed struggle. Important also was her general condemnation of the armed struggle as a mode of political struggle. But in her exposition of the LTTE women she raises several feminist issues. To my astonishment she has completely ignored the basic issue: the nature of state terror and oppression, that assumed genocidal proportions, destroying 70,000 Tamil civilians. Surprisingly, she did not touch on the history of the Tamil struggle, particularly the non-violent struggle that lasted more than two decades and finally succumbed to the violence of the state. Producing an ahistorical thesis, suppressing fifty years of resistance to state violence, Ms. Coomaraswamy nevertheless declares she is against violence’,

³Ibid. Page iv.

⁴Coomaraswamy, Radhika. LTTE Women Is This Liberation The Sunday Times January 5th 1997.

denouncing the LTTE women fighters as ‘perpetrators of violence’. From a close reading of her article I assumed that she has extremely limited knowledge of the Liberation Tigers, their aims, objectives and ideology. Furthermore, her portrayal of the women Tigers was predicated on false assumptions, most of which seem to be her own projections and conjectures.

To begin with, I appreciate Ms. Coomaraswamy’s commitment to human rights, non-violence and generally the welfare of humanity. She does indeed stand for and articulate many of the cardinal values current in international humanist politics. I do not find myself in disagreement with Ms. Coomaraswamy or indeed the world at large in recognising and accepting the principles of human rights enshrined in universal covenants of the United Nations. The privileging of fundamental rights and freedoms as central to humanity will continue to figure as larger issues in global politics. Nor do I have any difficulty in appreciating and respecting non-violence. These noble ideals are fundamental to human dignity, social development and civilised living. I also share with her a hope for humanity, wonder at creativity, stand in awe of the achievements of humanity over the ages, and marvel at the beautiful and fabulous diversity of life. Nevertheless, despite the projection of ideals that enhance humanistic tendencies, we can neither escape from nor ignore the vast sections of humanity, which live under the crushing weight of social injustice and oppression. The structures of oppression are multitudinous. People are oppressed by caste; women are subjected to discrimination and violence because of their gender; small nations are crushed by larger ones; ethnicity singles out peoples for mass murder; religious differences, racial differences, differences in the colour of skin leads to various forms of abuses and conflict. And so it goes on, an endless procession of different manifestations of injustice. The fact is that an oppressed humanity exists along with their trials, tribulations and struggles. There are sections of humanity who face extreme forms of repression and gross violations of human rights amounting to genocide. And for some of these people the acceptable norms of conflict resolution i.e. dialogue, consultation and negotiated settlement have failed to bring respite. Instead, the oppression continues, becomes entrenched and defies a rational settlement. And in these rather tragic circumstances, having exhausted all forms of democratic, non-violent modes of agitation, the persecuted choose to confront the genocidal violence of the oppressor by violent means, as the ultimate option in exercising the legitimate right to self-defence. One can argue that when all non-violent modes of struggle are exhausted and when persecution deepens to an intolerable magnitude threatening the very existence of a particular national formation of a people, the violence of the oppressed becomes qualitatively different from the violence of the oppressor. In this case, the violence of the oppressed becomes the legitimate weapon of selfdefence for the preservation of the life of the community as a whole. This is the case with the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. Despite the inadequacies of the political arrangements the British left behind when they handed back sovereignty to the people of the island, the onus of responsibility for governance was invested with the politicians who formed the government. One is left to speculate what the situation would be today had such concepts as multi-culturalism, multi-racism, pluralism etc prevailed as the ideal type of polity at that uniquely historical time in the island. One can only presume that today’s cataclysmic events would never have emerged. Tragically, racism and the ultra-nationalist sentiments prevailed instead amongst the Sinhalese and their political representatives. As opposed to building a

democratic, pluralist society under a modern progressive state, the Sinhala political leaders stooped to the baseness of whipping up racial and religious fanaticism. The post-independence Sri Lankan state abrogated its responsibilities for the wellbeing of all its citizens and became an embodiment of institutionalised racism. Over the past fifty years the state has been blatantly and unashamedly implementing undemocratic and unjust policies which, in effect, have seriously disrupted the homogenous existence of its historical neighbours in the North and East the Tamils.

A Struggle against Genocide

I need not repeat the history of injustice to which the Tamil people have been subjected. It is well documented. But the oppression is more grave and far deeper than most analysts have perceived. In my view, after twenty years of living with the Tamil people in various circumstances and witnessing the depth of their persecution, I am compelled to conclude that the Tamil people's struggle for political rights has become a struggle against genocide. And it is against this mode of oppression that the Tamils are compelled to wage their armed struggle in defence of their right to existence. Of course I am well aware that the charge of genocide is grave; it is regarded as the most serious crime against humanity. Therefore, a question may be posed as to whether the mode of oppression perpetrated against the Tamils can be designated as genocide and on what grounds such a charge of that magnitude can be levelled against the Sri Lankan state. To answer such a question it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the term genocide and explain the conditions that give rise to that phenomenon in the Sri Lankan context.

Genocide has not been explicitly defined. There is no clear, universally accepted definition or a general theory of genocide. The definition provided by the Genocide Convention of 1948, which is regarded as a pre-emptory norm of international law, is limited and narrow in its focus. Genocide is limited to acts 'committed with intent to destroy, in whole or part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group'. Based on certain historical experiences of mankind, genocide is generally understood as a deliberate act of exterminating a group of people (designated as a nation, race and ethnic formation) through mass murder as has happened to the Jewish people in German concentration camps. On that basis the U.N. Convention defines genocide emphasising the aspect of physical extermination of people. Though the huge loss of Tamil lives resulting from racist violence, military offensive operations and 'disappearances' fits into this definition, we find such a definition inadequate and too limited to explain the most subtle and sophisticated forms of genocide which aims to destroy, over a period of time, the racial, ethnic or national identity of a people by systematically destroying their political, social, cultural and economic structures. It is well known that some international Governments which participated in the Genocide Convention, to cover up their own actions, did not favour a wider framework of definition. The famous international jurist Raphael Lemkin, who originally coined the word genocide, provides a wider definition of genocide in the following terms in his famous work 'Axis Rule in Occupied Europe'.

“Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a co-ordinate plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups. Genocide is directed against the national groups as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national groups”.⁵

Based on aspects of the above definition, we can argue that the mode of oppression practised against the Tamil people by the Sinhala state is none other than genocide. This genocidal oppression, which spans a period of fifty years, is based on a calculated strategy implemented by successive Sri Lankan governments with a deliberate intention of destroying the essential foundations of the Tamil nation i.e. the land, the language, culture, economic, social and political life. The ultimate objective is to destroy the national or ethnic identity of the Tamil people.

Genocidal programmes are the ultimate manifestation and expression of inhumanity. Genocide wallows in the terror it inflicts, tramples on human lives; it is dismissive of familial social bonds, disrespectful to age and gender also. Women too are part of the targeted collective and become victims of this horrendous crime. Indeed women are often singled out as mediums through whom acts of genocidal intent can be perpetrated. The widespread rape of women during racial riots or during military occupation is an example. At the individual level, rape is experienced by the woman as a despicable and gross violation of her person and an act of mental and physical torture perpetrated against her. But at the collective level, rape aims to violate and humiliate the norms of society. The violation of women outrages the dignity and deeply offends the national sentiments and feelings of a nation. While women may be used as mediums to humiliate the feelings of a nation of people, the overall objective is the genocide of a people. In such circumstances, and to the dismay of Ms. Coomaraswamy and her school of thought, women cannot be denied their right to self-defence of themselves and their people. To deny an oppressed people their right to self-defence is to ask that people to commit mass suicide. So, for Ms. Coomaraswamy to posit the LTTE women in the armed struggle as ‘perpetrators of violence’ who ring the ‘death knell for femininity’, as contributors to the ‘militarisation of civil society’ who commit ‘human rights’ violations, is to pitch the argument in the wrong direction. The participation of women in the armed struggle has to be viewed as an extension of their participation in the national resistance campaign. Women have participated in all non-violent campaigns and it is therefore obvious that when the mode of struggle undergoes transformation, women’s participation would be part of that new trend. If non-violent struggle has already

⁵Lemkin, Raphael. Chapter IX ‘Genocide’ in ‘Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation’. Washington, D.C. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944. Page 79.

failed it would be absurd for women to continue to pursue such a meaningless exercise. Worse still, such a mode could be counterproductive. Ms. Coomaraswamy has missed the point. It is the state oppression of the Tamil people that has driven women to participate in the armed struggle.

There seems to be, in Ms. Coomaraswamy's article, a general misconception centring on women in armed struggle. Her article conveys the idea of armed struggle and the extension of arms to women as a form of military take-over. It is conceived as a deliberate, irreversible process aimed ultimately at the displacement of democratic values, the due process of law, dialogue and negotiated settlements to resolve conflicts. This 'militarisation' of civil society which Ms. Coomaraswamy observes taking place amongst the Tamil people, is not an end in itself but rather marks a definitive stage in the evolutionary history of the Tamil struggle where the masses of people, including the young, elderly and women, register their ultimate political voice through an open insurrectionary revolt against an otherwise callous and deaf body polity intent on destroying the Tamil people. It was the objective conditions of genocide and the urgency to resist and defend against the forces of destruction, that the Tamil populous, including women, voluntarily entered the process of armed struggle. Therefore, the phenomenon of 'militarisation' as conceived by Ms. Coomaraswamy is not a deliberate exploitative ploy by the LTTE to enhance its troop levels for the war, but rather a historical necessity produced by the extreme conditions of civil war. Indeed, I would argue that Ms. Coomaraswamy's concern about the 'militarisation' of civil society and the violation of human rights would be best directed against the Sinhala women joining the state military forces by which action they are ultimately opting into the oppressive apparatus of the state and unnecessarily falling in line with a male prioritised institution, strengthening the hand of Sinhala nationalists and contributing to the perpetuation of a brutal war. Sinhala feminists have failed to persuade their sisters that while they have the right to choose to join the military forces, there is no real urgency to do so. The nation, for them, would be best served by projecting their 'feminine' qualities in peaceful struggle for a radical, fair and just solution to the ethnic conflict. For Sinhala women living in a 'democratic' political system, governed by their own people, under a constitution which preserves and protects their language, religion and culture, where they are not discriminated or subjected to racial violence, or threatened with genocide, they are not required to join the military forces.

Women and National Struggle

Ms. Coomaraswamy, being a United Nations official, should be mindful of the preponderance of national conflicts in contemporary world politics. The occurrence of gross human rights violations amounting to genocide in several ethnic conflict situations in the world has become serious concern to the international community. In some cases, for example, Kosovo and East Timor, the international community was compelled to intervene and establish peace through force or rather through military violence. The international community is fully aware that Sri Lanka's ethnic war continues to be the most violent conflict in Asia and that the Tamil nation

has been fighting against the oppression of the Sinhala-Buddhist state. That the Tamils of the Northeast constitute a nation of people and that their struggle is thus a national struggle is an indisputable historical political reality. Tamil women, who constitute half the population of the Tamil nation, are inextricably embedded in this national struggle. The women who have joined the Tamil liberation army as well as the majority of the women who participate in the civilian mass protests, constitute the backbone of the Tamil national struggle. A historically developed, fully matured national struggle transcends gender differences and the spirit of nationalism - or rather the national consciousness - binds the people into an integrated, united force committed to a singular project of freedom.

Ms. Coomaraswamy denounces nationalist struggles arguing that the nationalist movements exploit women to fulfil their nationalist aspirations. For her, nationalism and nationalist struggles belong to the realm of reactionary politics. As opposed to nationalism, she counterposes internationalism or rather the universalism of women's movements glorifying 'international ideals of women's solidarity across cultures, against war and for peace'. Ms. Coomaraswamy, though a United Nations Rapporteur on Violence Against Women' lives in a different ideological universe divorced from the crude realities of the conflict in which her own people are entrenched. I am in little doubt that the women of Tamil Eelam would be extremely annoyed and take issue with anyone who preaches to them about the international ideals of global solidarity, of transcultural unity, of humanism and non-violence when they are forced to live in military occupied zones, in refugee camps faced with the constant threat of death, of military violence and of rape. It is easy to philosophise and preach universal values from ivory towers in Geneva and New York. But these sermons have no meaning to those women who are condemned to face terror everyday of their lives.

The induction of women into the fighting force, Ms. Coomaraswamy argues, has resulted in a major transformation with regard to the 'symbolic representation of women in Tamil society'. Referring to anthropologists for the source of her argument, she posits the 'privileged woman' in Tamil Hindu society as the 'auspicious married woman with many children and material wealth'. This ideal woman is symbolically represented by 'wearing of rich saris, brilliant jewellery, silver toe-ring and a red pottu on her forehead'.⁶ Having portrayed the very affluent, high caste Hindu married woman with her lavish adornments and many children as the ideal Tamil woman, Ms. Coomaraswamy counter poses the LTTE woman as the negation of the ideal traditional Tamil woman. Criticising the Tiger women in combat fatigues, 'without make-up, jewellery or ostentation' and short hair, she injects the concept of androgyny to project the female Tigers as masculine devoid of any traditional Tamil characteristics of the feminine. This is a gross misrepresentation and extremely limited understanding of LTTE women, which, we can only assume, is primarily aimed at undermining their image and participation in the struggle. Firstly, Ms. Coomaraswamy should realise that the LTTE women fighters are combatants belonging to various contingents of a professional liberation army, which is at constant war with the Sri Lankan state. As combatants constantly engaged in battles, the LTTE women cadres are compelled to adopt their mode of appearance to the conditions of war. It would

⁶Coomaraswamy, Radhika. 'LTTE Women Is This Liberation' The Sunday Times January 5th 1997.

be absurd to conceive of LTTE women fighters in rich saris, brilliant jewellery, flowers in their flowing hair involved in battles in the trenches. Ms. Coomaraswamy would have seen, at least in books, how similarly the women fighters in various national liberation struggles wear combat fatigues, boots, with no make up, jewellery or long flowing hair. Can she attribute androgyny to all those brave young women who fought for the freedom of their nations relinquishing ostentation during the years of war? Furthermore, it is a total misconception on the part of Ms. Coomaraswamy to advance a thesis that the LTTE projects androgyny as an ideal for women. Nor do the Tigers glorify the so-called 'armed virgins', a concept Ms. Coomaraswamy borrows from Professor Peter Schalk. She says, 'However, the LTTE is also clear that the ideal woman remains a virgin; sexuality is seen as an evil, debilitating force'. The source of this absurd notion remains unclear. This assumption betrays her total ignorance about the lives of the LTTE women. The LTTE leadership, for many years now, has been supporting love, marriage and the having of children among the cadres. Indeed, over the years we have attended many weddings as an outcome of love marriages. Furthermore, the LTTE has a marriage counselling board to help and support marriages. The monthly financial maintenance and residences for the married couples is drawn from the coffers of the LTTE. Subsequently, Ms. Coomaraswamy's spurious accusations of the LTTE promoting the eradication of femininity, love and sexuality have no basis in fact.

Drawing from feminist theorists, Ms. Coomaraswamy distinguishes between the 'positive qualities of certain constructions of femininity i.e. nurturance, gentleness, compassion, tolerance' as opposed to the masculine worldview of 'authority, hierarchy and aggression' and argues that the LTTE's ideology does not allow for the promotion of positive feminine qualities. Positing the celebration of life as the fundamental value of universal feminism, she charges the LTTE with celebrating death as martyrdom. While I do not subscribe to the scientific basis behind formulating universal constructs of femininity and masculinity, I do sympathise with the attempts by humanist feminists who theorise such noble principles to advance the cause of global peace and harmony. But for Ms. Coomaraswamy to argue that the LTTE, particularly the LTTE women, do not subscribe to creativity, to the sacredness of life, to all positive qualities attributed to femininity, is ridiculous. This clearly shows that she writes from conjecture, rather than from facts. I think she does not have access, as most Colombo writers do not, to the substantial political, theoretical and literary work produced in Tamil by LTTE women. Ms. Coomaraswamy's projections are based purely on the appearance of female fighters in 'masculine' attire. The simple fact that Tamil women participate in the armed resistance and the dead are honoured as heroes has given rise in the imaginative mind of Ms. Coomaraswamy of a plethora of negative ideas about LTTE women.

In her rather shallow and limited perspective, the armed struggle of the LTTE is reduced to a simple phenomenon of violence and those who are involved in the struggle are depicted as 'perpetrators of violence' and terminators of life. In this crude assessment the objective historical conditions that gave rise to the Tamil resistance movement are deliberately erased. So is the objective of the struggle. Ms. Coomaraswamy may object if I say that the LTTE cadres, both men and women, are fighting to protect their people from genocidal holocaust. In other words, they are fighting to protect life, the collective life of the Tamil nation. This is how

the Tamil people view the struggle. For them the Tigers are their defenders, freedom fighters who are prepared to sacrifice their lives to save and protect the life of the community. Here one finds an extraordinary phenomenon of self-sacrifice, the renunciation of individual life for the redemption of the collective life, which is a supreme humanist ideal. It is in this context the martyrs are honoured. It is not a celebration of death as Ms. Coomaraswamy alleges, but rather an honour and respect given to a life sacrificed for the greater cause of the preservation of the lives of a people as a whole.

I have lived and worked amongst the LTTE women for several years and shared their experiences of joy and sorrow, their aspirations and hopes. I can say with certainty that there is no ideal projection of the 'armed virgin' in their theoretical or political ideology. Nor is there any renunciation of positive feminine qualities. Behind the appearance of every uniformed female fighter, is a tender, gentle and passionate young woman with all the qualities attributed to femininity. I lost count of the numbers of so-called 'armed virgins' who fell in love, married and have produced children and enjoy married life. I have seen the positive qualities of nurturance in abundance among LTTE's married women. It is deeply disturbing to note that a well-read woman such as Ms. Coomaraswamy could demonise the LTTE women as 'armed virgins', as 'perpetrators of violence', and as negations of ideal traditional Tamil women. Her conceptualisations have no basis in truth.

Empowerment of Women

Another issue raised by Ms. Coomaraswamy centres on whether or not LTTE women are empowered or 'disempowered', as she likes to argue. For her, the LTTE women are 'disempowered', 'cogs in the wheel of someone else's designs and plans', and 'implementers of policy made by someone else, by men'. To advance such a thoroughly negative perception of the LTTE women is both sad and misleading. At the most basic level, Ms. Coomaraswamy must be aware that fundamental to the empowerment process is the recognition of structures of oppression. Women who join the LTTE have identified Sinhala racism as the basic structure of oppression to which they are subjected. Participating in a struggle to free themselves from this mode of oppression is a process of empowerment in itself. But Ms. Coomaraswamy, in her rush to demonise the LTTE women, totally ignores participation in this mode of struggle as a crucial empowering experience. Furthermore, her attack on their level of empowerment does not take into account any consideration of the conditions in which they operate. She is devoid of any empathy with the LTTE women fighters. The LTTE women are not operating with the support of a state administration with financial resources from international organisations to realise the ideas and implement the projects they have formulated. Faced with constant military offensives, repetitive displacements, constrained by financial shortages and access to resources, the LTTE women struggle to realise their social projects and empowerment activities. So one has to question the motive behind Ms. Coomaraswamy's decision to take up the LTTE women and scrutinise the level of their empowerment and to single out the organisation as an example of inadequate representation of women at the top decision making

level. To substantiate her unnecessarily derogatory and negative conceptions of LTTE women, she cites their absence from the top decision-making level of the organisation as proof. But before we examine the truth of her allegations concerning the women in decision making level, we have to point out that the imbalance in the numbers of women at top decision-making level in governments and organisations throughout the world - including the one she herself works for has constituted an issue of major concern for feminists everywhere. Furthermore, as Ms. Coomaraswamy is certainly aware, the number of women at the top levels of power does not necessarily reflect the extent and depth of the empowerment of the masses of women in society. It is precisely this concern for the empowerment of the masses of women I have, since returning to Jaffna in 1990, consistently spoken and written about. Ms. Coomaraswamy, unfamiliar with my early writings and the women fighter's literature, took up my book *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers* to misrepresent the LTTE women. Since my book deals with the historical evolution of the women's military wing of the LTTE and does not take up central feminist concerns such as peace, non-violence, the empowerment of women, women in decision-making, the 'feminine principle', environment issues, reproductive rights of women, women in post-revolutionary societies, women and class, women and race and so on it is widely assumed that I am unaware of these serious feminist issues, or that I am not concerned about them. Based on this misconception I am portrayed as an instigator of armed struggle and militarism. This indeed, is a travesty of truth. Not only am I aware of many of these issues, but, as I intend to point out, I have written and consistently spoken about some of them on several occasions in the past. Before we move onto the issue of empowerment of LTTE women I wish to clarify, briefly, my views on women's emancipation.

For reasons that would take me beyond the theme of this writing, I did not include major feminist issues in my book *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers*. The book was largely conjunctural. Arguing that young women had broken with the past, their joining of a freedom struggle had opened up new possibilities for women and the mode of participation had challenged traditional views about women in society, was, whether feminists like it or not, a reality in Tamil social formation. And as I argued in the book and stand by the position today, women cadres themselves were not only proud of their new radicalism but were flush with a new confidence and self-esteem.

It is well known that theoretical paradigms couched national liberation struggles with women's participation in progressive terminology. I set out my original position drawing from those theoretical positions. Adopting the socialist feminist position, I argued that a national liberation struggle includes on its political agenda a programme for social transformation involving the elimination of oppression and discrimination within the emerging nation state. Logically, such a radical programme would have to include tackling the various levels of women's oppression for them to be located to realise their potential, to fully participate in and to shape and influence the future society they wished to live in. So women's participation in armed struggle is for both national and social emancipation. Their participation itself constitutes a step towards their emancipation, a step towards their empowerment. When women start to struggle against oppression then we have to accept that women have begun to move towards their emancipation.

But time has moved on and we have witnessed unexpected changes of events that have rocked the world order. Political and economic systems collapsed like a pack of cards. Theories and concepts became defunct; some were dumped in the dustbin of history. Feminist critiques of socialist societies, their political problems and expressions of disappointments by women in post national liberation struggles, began to surface in political and feminist discourse. But I have never been a dreamy romantic believing that the articulation of a few progressive sentences and words in glossy political pamphlets would be sufficient to dislodge or entice men, with all the world's power in their hands, to take the rational path and unburden themselves by relinquishing to women a share of their power and changing their life styles and thinking. It was my position nearly twenty years ago and nothing has happened to convince me to dramatically change my view that women's emancipation is a long, ongoing process requiring constant vigilance, assessment and re-assessment of a multitude of issues if women are to effect the degrees of social change which will emancipate them and create a better world. For this, I argued, women in national liberation struggles require not only patriotism but a feminist consciousness also. In my document 'Women and Revolution' written in 1983, I argued, 'Women's participation and a feminist consciousness are crucial to national victory and social transformation. Identifying, articulating and fighting to alleviate modes and structures of women's oppression during the course of the national struggle provides the grounds to deepen and strengthen the struggle for national victory and effecting a radical social emancipation'.

Being close to a struggle in which women are confident that will lead to their emancipation and as an observer of events, I reiterated these sentiments several times in speeches and articles. In 1991, I wrote a cautionary article, which briefly sets out the problems of women in post national liberation struggles and touches on the issue of empowerment of women. The article, the 'Feminist Perspective' was translated into Tamil and appeared in the Women's Front magazine 'Suthunthira Paravaikal' under the heading 'Socialism and the Oppression of Women'. The article makes no pretensions of being in anyway an exhaustive study of the complex issues of women in socialist and post revolutionary societies nor is it a rigorous exposition of the concept the 'feminist perspective'. But that women do confront contradictions and complex socio-political problems and so as to avoid the possibility of similar situations emerging in the Tamil struggle, I concluded:

"That women must become a powerful political force capable of ensuring that women's issues are seen as integral to the overall programme of the Party or government, to influence policy decisions and to be part of the decision-making process in economic planning, the allocation of finance and resources. Women's issues should not be sacrificed at the altar of male orientated, male prioritised issues. This requires that the strength of a grass root women's organisation be translated into political authority. Thus we can begin to see that the objective of women in struggle goes beyond conceptions of equality with men, participation with men etc. where men's lives, behaviour, practices, authority become the yardstick of measurement for women. The objective of women goes beyond equalitarianism in a world defined by men. The objective of women in struggle is the emancipation

of women, but the emancipation of women entails the emancipation of men also from their stereotyped images and perceptions of the world. The emancipation of women embraces a much more radical politics, which entails a new vision of the world, society and women's place in it. To effect this new vision of the society and women's place in it women need political power to influence national politics. The new way of perceiving the world to the betterment of women and society can be called the feminist perspective".⁷

The above quotation reflects many of the concerns of international feminists. There is a recognition that women's participation in armed struggle is not an automatic guarantee of their future emancipation; that the radicalism of breaking out of the social mould has to be consistently built on and developed if women are to be emancipated. Accepting a male defined and prioritised world will also not lead to woman's emancipation nor does it necessarily lead to the creation of a better world. That men need to undergo serious reflection and transformation is also recognised. Crucial also, is the necessity of a grassroots women's organisation with participation in politics at the national level.

I will now address the crucial issues of women in the decision- making level of the LTTE and their empowerment. Ms. Coomaraswamy is looking for a radical impact by LTTE women on Tamil society. Many aspects of LTTE women's empowerment do appear to be very modest to the outside observer. But one of the very realistic aspects of the empowerment approach is to acknowledge and accept the very basic level at which action needs to take place if meaningful and enduring steps towards women's emancipation are to be made. This reality is a product of historical social oppression and its deep, devastating implications on the entire socio-psychological construction and potential of women. Since LTTE women themselves are from that social world it is perhaps a mistake to separate LTTE women as distinct from the collective of Tamil women. Indeed, I would go so far as to assert that it is impossible to distinguish the two. If a distinction at all is to be made it is only in the fact of their membership into the ranks of an organisation and adherence to its discipline. But essentially LTTE women are daughters of the soil and any assessment of their empowerment in the movement requires us to keep that basic fact in mind. Nevertheless, Ms. Coomaraswamy advances a misleading argument when she asserts that LTTE women are 'disempowered' and there is an absence of LTTE women in the decision making of the organisation. Their long history of participation in the struggle has earned two senior women cadres a place in the central decision- making body of the LTTE. Apart from their contribution to general LTTE policy, they articulate the interests of women at that level. The views they represent stem from collective discussions and decisions made by the senior female leaders of the political and military structures. Indeed, across the spectrum of the LTTE, women occupy senior and responsible posts, which necessitate serious decision making with repercussions on society. For example, in the judicial system in LTTE controlled areas we find female judges and Supreme Court judges. These women make final and decisive decisions which impact on people's lives and the society in general. Female lawyers represent complicated cases on behalf of women. In the medical section,

⁷'Suthunthira Paravaikal' May-June 1991.

a woman was the first doctor to join the LTTE and she has subsequently trained hundreds of male and female nurses in the organisation. Women assume enormous responsibility in the managing the finances of the LTTE. They manage their own administrative structure and finances of their sections. In the important area of media and information, women are opinion makers. An entire section of women collectively choose topics and direct their own films and news programmes. A newspaper is written, edited and produced by the women cadres. The rehabilitation organisation established to assist the displaced population employs women to take up the challenge of formulating and implementing socio-economic projects. An important example of women's participation in decision-making is found in the administration of the LTTE controlled territory. Women have been appointed as area leaders of particular geographical areas. They are responsible for decisions affecting people in their region and all administrative sections of the LTTE and the cadreship work under their command, including the male cadres. The experience, the self- confidence and self-esteem gained by these women occupying these important political and administrative posts, must, inevitably empower the women for social activity both inside and outside the LTTE. Furthermore, Ms. Coomaraswamy is lacking in the knowledge of the women's section dealing with specific problems of women. Thousands of women turn to this centre for assistance, advice and guidance. They seek help for innumerable social problems and medical care etc. and it is from these everyday experiences of women that the female cadres formulate new policies.

Furthermore, the number of women occupying the seats of power of the LTTE at this time might not satisfy armchair critics, there is no valid argument to assume a permanency of the situation. The large numbers of women at middle level decision making is substantial and encourages me to feel confident that many of these young women will be shifted to top level decision making positions in the future. Furthermore, in my view, the range and scope of new opportunities provided to young women cadres and the subsequent growth of confidence and self-esteem, which promotes the self- reliance of women convinces me that LTTE women are in a process of empowerment. In this process not only are women cadres becoming empowered, but they are contributing towards the empowerment of the masses of Tamil women in general. Their inroads into all areas of employment and social activity has set an example and opened up the possibility to other women of opportunities that might not have come their way for decades if left to evolve over time. In this way, LTTE women cadres have made an enormous contribution to the empowerment potential of Tamil women.

While the participation of women in the freedom struggle has continued to deepen the politics in Tamil Eelam, the political organisation of the LTTE the PFLT - was to be dealt a fatal blow when its leader became involved in a treacherous bid for power. A crisis in the politics of the PFLT exploded in Jaffna.

The PFLT and Mathaya

It was around 10p.m on a hot day in March 1993, when Mr. Mahendrarajah (Mathaya), the Deputy Head of the LTTE, entered our residence at Kokkuvil, Jaffna and announced he was going to observe a fast-unto-death in our house and demanded a room for that purpose.

Mathaya looked nervous and agitated. Dressed casually in a 'sarong' and shirt and carrying a small luggage bag with a few personal items, he claimed that his fast had begun the very moment he entered our house. His grim looking and armed bodyguards were waiting in front of our house and his four-wheel drive Pajero vehicle was parked near the gate. Taken aback by this sudden development, Bala and I queried as to why he wanted to fast-unto-death and for what reason he had chosen our residence as the venue to launch his campaign.

Mathaya explained that he was disillusioned with the LTTE leadership, particularly with Mr. Pirabakaran, for removing him from the Chairmanship of the political party (PFLT) and also from the deputy leadership of the LTTE. He said that the decision was unfair and unacceptable and therefore he wanted to register his protest in the form of fasting. Insofar as his choice of residence as the venue of fasting was concerned, he explained that it was the place where all leaders and commanders of the LTTE, as well as the local journalists visit, and therefore his protest would be known to the entire movement as well as the public if it was performed in our house.

Bala and I were well aware of the background to the story of Mathaya's downfall. The primary reason was his utter mismanagement of the party and the effect on the movement's support base. Mathaya, in his role as the leader of the party and the deputy leader of the LTTE, assumed an autocratic style and appointed his henchmen to the seats of power in the political organisation in violation of the party constitution. The constitution stipulated an electoral system for the selection of party officials from village to district levels. Mathaya's action undermined the project of democratisation of the party organs and failed to reflect the will of the people. Eventually the PFLT became a corrupt institution promoting the interests of a few individuals who were loyal to Mathaya. The public resentment was so widespread, it compelled the LTTE to dissolve the party organisation or risk further alienation. Mathaya lost his positions as the party leader as well as the deputy leader of the LTTE as a result. Though the LTTE Central Committee and the General Council made the decision after lengthy discussions, Mathaya felt that the move to oust him was an act of personal vendetta by Mr. Pirabakaran and he was determined to challenge the decision.

For several hours through the night, we pleaded with Mathaya to give up his fast and resolve the matter through discussion with the leadership rather than undertaking this mode of protest. We also felt unhappy over the choice of our residence as the venue for his fasting. That would implicate us as accessories to Mathaya's scheme of things, in our view. Finally Mathaya relented when we argued that he had the right to protest but not in our residence. He decided to give up his fast when Bala promised to hand over his letter of protest to Mr. Pirabakaran. Thus, the drama ended in the following morning and Mathaya left our house with his bodyguards

and an element of satisfaction that he had registered his protest with the Balasinghams by observing a night of fasting. This incident was the tip of the iceberg insofar as Mathaya's affair was concerned, as we later learned.

About a month later, Mathaya and some of his close associates were arrested by the LTTE's intelligence wing for conspiring to assassinate Mr. Pirabakaran. In a massive cordon and search of his camp in Manipay - supervised by senior commanders of the LTTE - Mathaya was taken into custody along with his friends. We were shocked and surprised by this sudden turn of events. Mr. Pirabakaran, who visited our residence that day, told us briefly of a plot hatched by the Indian external intelligence agency - the RAW- involving Mathaya as the chief conspirator to assassinate him and to take-over the leadership of the LTTE. He also said that further investigations were needed to unravel the full scope of the conspiracy.

The investigation took several months to complete. Mathaya, his close associates involved in the conspiracy, and several other cadres who functioned directly under him, were thoroughly investigated. Finally, the complete story of a plot emerged. Confessions by all the main actors were tape-recorded and video filmed. The leadership also arranged a series of meetings for all the LTTE cadres to explain the aims and objectives behind the plot. Apart from Mathaya, other senior cadres who were involved in the conspiracy were allowed to make public confessions during those meetings confirming their involvement. It was a complicated and bizarre story of the Indian intelligence agency establishing secret contacts with Mathaya through his close associates, with the promise of huge funds and political backing from India if the plot succeeded and the LTTE leadership was eliminated. A former bodyguard of Mr. Pirabakaran was secretly released from an Indian jail in Tamil Nadu and trained as the main assassin. He was sent to Jaffna with an intriguing story of a successful jailbreak as cover. His assignment was to plant a time bomb in Pirabakaran's bedroom as a part of an overall plot planned by Mathaya. This young man, as soon as he landed in Jaffna, was once again included amongst Mr. Pirabakaran's bodyguards. Surprisingly, just a few days before his arrest, he visited our residence to tell us fabulous stories about his jail break. The investigation established, without doubt, that Mathaya was the chief conspirator. The plot was to assassinate Mr. Pirabakaran and some senior commanders loyal to him and assume the leadership of the organisation. On 28th December 1994, Mathaya and a few of his fellow conspirators were executed on charges of conspiracy to eliminate the leadership.

Following the dissolution of the now discredited PFLT and the indictment of Mathaya, the political wing of the LTTE was restructured and Mr. Tamil Chelvan, who had been functioning as the military commander of the Jaffna peninsula, was appointed as the head of the section.

The Dowry Controversy

Dowrying women at the time of marriage is an institutionalised and intractable customary practice amongst the Jaffna Tamils. The practice is encoded in the Thesawalamai Laws, the customary property laws of the Jaffna people. In these extraordinary and interesting property

laws, we find a matrilineal - alongside a patrilineal set of property regulations. The origins of the matrilineal property system have a history extending beyond three hundred years of recorded Thesawalamai codes. The origins of the practice are contested, but it has been argued that the dowry system, as it is practised amongst the Jaffna Tamils, derives its origins from the Dravidian Tamils who migrated to Jaffna from Southwest India, perhaps as long as ten centuries ago. The Malabars, as colonial rulers called these people, were originally Dravidian Tamils from Kerala who had a property system embodied in their customary law called 'Marumakkal Thayam'. The colonial rulers modified the laws but the essence of the practice of dowrying women has not fundamentally changed over the centuries. The practice has both its supporters and detractors. Known as 'chidenam' amongst the Tamil community, dowrying women remains, to this day, a determining factor in people's lives. More specifically it has a devastating impact on the lives of women. It is on this crucial issue, a woman's social status and her future socio-economic life will be determined.

This customary practice of the Jaffna Tamils came to my attention when we were living in London. The majority of the young Tamil men known to us, were, in some way or another, deeply involved in a process of acquiring and saving dowry money for their sisters living in Jaffna. Complaints and disapproval of the practice flowed easily from the tongues of young Tamil men as they slogged for long hours at work to earn a substantial dowry for their sisters. For one reason or another, most of our London Tamil friends disagreed with the practice. All cursed the practice for reducing their sisters to commodities in the dowry market. Nevertheless, it was quite extraordinary to observe a reversal in attitude to the practice when it came their turn to marry. Very few young men rejected the dowry offered to them and many legitimised their receipt of the property at the time of their own marriage. For me, in the late 70s and early 80s, the idea of women having to literally 'buy' a husband didn't agree with my burning feminist notions and I suspected that such a demeaning practice would be met with fierce opposition from Tamil women. But, as I later learned, the dowry system was far more complex than I realised and it could not be reduced to the simple practice of handing over of an agreed sum of money and property to the bridegroom and his family at the time of marriage of a woman.

The more deeply I related to the Tamil community, the more apparent it became that the practice of dowry was a pivotal factor in many socio-economic problems in the Tamil community with potentially devastating effects on the lives and dignity of women. Mr. Pirabakaran and the cadres we met in India in the late 70s early 80s opposed the practice and were adamant that the abolition of dowry would occupy a foremost project in the LTTE political programme. The young women cadres lamented the fact that they should be subjected to such a demeaning practice and fiercely argued in favour of its abolition. Immersed in this anti-dowry environment, I assumed that there would be opposition to the practice amongst the Tamil community in Jaffna. But, to my surprise, when we went to live in Jaffna, I could not discover collective opposition to the dowrying of women. Rather, I found a variety of opinions on the subject, many in support of the practice. Support for the practice perplexed me, particularly when it came from articulate Tamil women. Fleeting remarks from property owning women indicated that 'chidenam' (dowry) was women's hereditary property and it would be dangerous

to deprive women of this right by abolishing the dowry system. Many parents argued that it was their parental right to devolve their family property or gift to their daughters in the form of jewellery, land, money or a house at the time of her marriage and no law could deprive them of that right and expression of love. Vast sections of people argued that it would be impossible to arrange a marriage for their daughters without a dowry. Some women argued that 'chidenam' was their hereditary property and it was unfair to legislate against that right. A very serious view was advanced by people who were opposed to the dowry practice but were of the opinion that it would require more than a law to root out such a deeply entrenched customary practice. For them, a fundamental change in social attitude amongst the people was crucial if the practice was to be rid of. These views were not lost on me and I realised the issue could turn out to be the opening of a Pandora's box in the Tamil community.

By 1993, dowry demands from bridegrooms and their families escalated outrageously, adversely affecting families and making the lives of many women miserable. The dowry problem had become a heated and controversial social issue. The injustice of the practice compelled many women to demand from LTTE women cadres the implementation of their 1992 International Women's Day pledge to abolish the dowry practice. This demand was taken to Mr. Pirabakaran who decided to act on the matter. However, in view of the far reaching consequences for the society and the diverse arguments and sentiments surrounding the issue, Bala and I were sceptical that enacting a law was a solution to bringing an end to the practice. I, in particular, wanted to have much more accurate information and knowledge on the issue. If the LTTE were to effect such a radical change to such a deeply entrenched practice, we believed the people's support was crucial to success. Without the support of the people behind the proposed changes, in our view, loopholes would be found around the system or the practice would go underground and demands would skyrocket. Subsequently, we advanced the idea of researching public opinion and opening up public debate on the issue. LTTE cadres, both men and women, were deployed to the villages and schools, university, offices etc for meetings to engage in debate and discussion with as wide a section of the people as possible. In this way, the LTTE men and women cadres could advance their opposition to the practice and at the same time hear from the people their concerns and canvass the people's views on the solution to the problem. In the meantime, Bala opened up the debate in the local press by writing an article in an assumed name, advancing one perspective of public opinion. There was no public response to the article. Keen to ignite public debate and discussion on the practice he wrote another article from a different viewpoint under another assumed name. He wrote several articles using various names but failed to receive the feedback to justify continuing the media debate and the issue fizzled out. A sociological research questionnaire was formulated in a bid to discover more accurate knowledge about the social dynamics of the practice and women cadres were despatched to research the Northern province. Once this information had been collated, solutions could then be worked out. New laws to ban the practice of dowry would then be formulated and presented to the people for debate and amendment before it became statutory.

In the meantime, I decided to research the practice to discover and clarify the roots and mechanisms of 'chidenam' in Jaffna society. I was fortunate to have access to out of print

classical sociological texts and law books written in English by Jaffna scholars who had explored the subject and documented the many legal cases. I spent many hours everyday at the Jaffna University Library searching into old newspapers and sociological magazines for articles on the topic. But when my research took me to the laws and history of the practice of 'chidenham' in Tamil society I was amazed and also became anxious. I was fascinated by the discovery of an ancient matrilineal property system, which gave to women considerable property rights. I was anxious that if new laws were to be implemented they should aim to strengthen the property rights of women not to inadvertently undermine them. Over the centuries, women in other societies had struggled hard to gain property rights, so it would have been extremely foolish for the Tamil community to undermine a well-entrenched historical matrilineal system. The customary laws required thorough scrutiny and any changes in the law should be made by working through the existing codes and strengthening them further, was how I viewed the legal approach to a solution to the dowry problem. In reality, in- depth research was required to discover how far the colonial rulers had modified the property codes and to what extent those modifications were useful to women and the society. Furthermore, the understanding of this matrilineal system coupled with a knowledge of various socio-cultural practices e.g. the arranged marriage system, led me to lean towards the view that the practice of dowry in its modern form was more indicative of the social oppression of women than an issue at the centre of their oppression. And so I set out my views in my book entitled *Unbroken Chains* published in 1994. The first part of the book focuses on the customary laws of the Jaffna Tamils as set out in the Thesawalamai codes, with the view of elucidating the property laws and the property relations upon which dowrying women is based. The second part examines the modalities of the contemporary practice of dowry and shows how the custom has a determining effect on the social existence of Tamil women. The contribution of state oppression to a deviation of the practice is explored. The arranged marriage system comes under scrutiny for its role in maintaining the caste system. The unyielding character of cultural influences in the determination of women's lives is pointed out in the case of many professional women who, regardless of education, employment and status, are compelled to submit to the hegemony of social tradition and the dowry system. I examine the issue of domestic labour and its relatedness to the dowry system. The conclusion briefly looks at the effects of dependency on women's lives. The book was translated into Tamil and appeared as a series of articles in the literary magazine 'Vellichum'. The objective behind the writing of the book was to clarify the concept 'chidenam' in Jaffna culture. If my book has contributed towards that process, that is sufficient for me.

Eventually, on the instructions of Mr. Pirabakaran, the LTTE lawmakers (Justice Department) formulated new laws pertaining to the practice of dowry, upholding the property rights of women and abolishing the practice of cash donations to relatives of the bridegroom. The most significant aspect of the new law was the removal of the ancient code that gave the husband control over his wife's property.

Researching Violence against Women

When the IPKF withdrew from Jaffna in 1990, they left behind a legacy of phenomenal social problems. Years of economic underdevelopment, the destruction of property, the disruption of war on people's lives and occupation by a foreign army all added up to create a complex set of social problems amongst the Jaffna population. That there had been a breakdown in traditional cultural values and behaviour was a shared and lamented view amongst the people. The LTTE was faced with the enormous task of restoring calm and order into people's lives and preventing social anarchy. The LTTE offices in every electorate throughout the Peninsula were inundated with a variety of complaints from the public on numerous social and criminal offences. Hence, the people demanded action from the LTTE to restore the tradition of social discipline and cohesion, which has been a distinguishing and admirable feature of the Jaffna society. But within this context it was also possible to formulate progressive strategies to some of the persistent social problems. Specific social problems, in my view, required thorough exploration and research based on which policies and solutions could be formulated.

Women, in particular, were facing phenomenal social problems and it was crucial to research particular social issues to discover the reality behind the appearance and formulate a forward-looking agenda for the future. For example, women from the depressed and poor sections of the society were repeated offenders in bootlegging. Arresting and imposing heavy fines on these women made no impact on stopping the practice. In my perception, punishing the women by either detaining them in custody or fining them had the potential to create even more social problems. Arrested women were not only criminalised, but the children were separated from the mother's care and control. Both of these factors, in my view, had to be taken into consideration. I argued in favour of viewing the problem differently and the formulation of new solutions. In many cases widowed or abandoned women or women with disabled husbands had become the breadwinners and bootlegging was the only avenue in the socio-economic environment in Jaffna through which they could earn a living to support their families. But this social problem was a classic example of how thorough research into the dynamics of the issue could provide the answers for new solutions. So in fact, while the negative impact of war on the society was profound, it nevertheless provided a unique opportunity for positive social change. On the other hand, the social disruption brought about by war had the potential for the destruction of many positive dimensions of the society. Much of what was being destroyed could never be restored to its original form. In this complicated and serious context, in my view, there existed wide space and urgency for social research to capture and record as much of the social history of the Tamil community as was possible before it perished forever. Opportunities abounded for the recording of social history. For example, I was amazed to discover three and four generations of women living in either one house or one compound. That meant that the oldest woman in the family possessed the knowledge of over one hundred years of social history, if she remembered her own mother's life. The socio-cultural history of women from different castes, the village history, changing social practices, the role of village midwives, the history of jewellery and clothes etc could be recorded first hand from these living encyclopaedias of social history.

Within this context of my thinking and interest in researching the many problems of Tamil women since my return to Jaffna, I followed up the exploration of the dowry issue with research into domestic violence in 1994-95. Amidst the seemingly insurmountable social problems faced by women during this period, incidents of domestic violence against women occasionally popped up in conversations. When a female cadre responded to my idea of researching domestic violence with the answer, 'What about women beating up men?', I knew the area was complex and at the level of common sense understanding. While I learned during my research, that one or two women did enter into stand up fights with their husbands, I never had time or the resources to research the issue of female domestic violence and instead I remained at the level of domestic violence against women.

The Tamil Eelam Police Force was determined to protect the interests of women and any of the cases they reported at the police station were viewed sympathetically and swift action taken on their complaints. So in the absence of any form of counselling services, marriage guidance advice, refuge for battered women, social service etc, women came forward to lodge complaints of domestic violence by their husbands. It was an indication of the confidence women enjoyed in the police force. But most of the complaints women made against their husbands were cries for help to arrest the violence and to resolve the family problem. Very few women indeed were aiming at either separation from their husbands or wished to see them prosecuted. Because I viewed the issue of domestic violence as more serious than a private matter between husband and wife in which nobody should interfere, I decided to try and open up this area and at least ground this injustice against women in some form of scientific research or theoretical analysis.

Mr. Nedasan, the Head of the Police Force, co-operated with my research plans and after gaining the permission from women who had lodged complaints of domestic violence -allowed me access to some of his records. I studied the records of complaints to gain some inkling into the level of violence the prospective interviewee had been subjected to and began talking to as many of these women as possible. Given the secrecy and shame in society surrounding this issue, I was pleasantly surprised by the willingness of the women to travel long distances on bicycles for me to conduct the interview and readiness to share their intimate marital stories with me. Apart from a few young women who had not fully come to terms with the impact of the violence on their married lives and who both defended and blamed themselves, the ladies were totally uninhibited in rendering their stories; in some cases their entire married lives constituted daily beatings. I attribute my success in relating to these ladies to two factors. Firstly, I was a married woman. I doubt that very intimate matters would have been told to an unmarried Tamil interviewer or, any unmarried woman at all for that matter. Unmarried women are assumed not to know the 'secrets of married life' and therefore unable to understand the depth and intricacies of the intimate lives of married people. Secondly, I viewed the co-operation of the women as an indication of their aspiration to talk confidentially and openly to a person about their experiences with this problem. Apart from the content and level of the violence to which these women had been subjected, an issue that truly astounded me was the depth of compassion these women retained for the men who had abused them for most of their married lives, particularly the older women. The retention of their sympathy for their

violent husbands is an issue in itself, but it also reflects the spirit of tolerance and love for their married partner, which has its roots in the cultural norms of Tamil society. Many social issues spun off from the content of these interviews, one of the most important being the reality of marital rape in the lives of Tamil women.

I continued with my research into domestic violence, but the sample of women was narrow in scope. For the study to be truly representative, it was crucial that I should speak to women who had not reported their case, but rather suppressed the violence and suffered quietly at home. And it was at this point that I ran into the expected reluctance of women to discuss the issue. Although various sources informed me of cases of domestic violence, I found it extremely difficult to break through the barrier of silence and to bring the social problem out from behind the walls of their houses. The caste/class factor in domestic violence came into play. Many of the women who had the courage to report the domestic violence and bring it out of the closet were women from the oppressed sections of society. Generally, the domestic violence could be attributed to the husband's abuse of alcohol. The more complicated cases amongst the middle and high caste women remained closeted behind the walls of their homes.

But while social research was my personal interest, there were other dimensions of commentary that were required for the struggle in general. Sections of the Tamil diaspora often pointed out and complained to the international section of the LTTE in Jaffna about the absence of an authoritative LTTE publications in English to represent its views on the world stage. In response to and accepting that there was truth in the criticism - Bala and I took up the responsibility of producing an English language newspaper, 'Inside Report' which clearly reflected the views of the LTTE. It contained political analysis, articles on human rights violations, the military situation etc. This monthly publication consumed a great deal of our time, for, in view of the absence of any proficient English writing journalists in Jaffna at that time, Bala and myself and the occasional article from the public, wrote the contents of the eight page paper. Producing a paper under conditions of war where facilities and resources are scarce is a staggering task. Not only did we write, type, edit, proof read and layout the newspaper, but it was necessary to spend time at the press ensuring that letters did not drop out of the hand composed typeset plates during the process of printing. The newspaper, as did my social research, came to a halt with the outbreak of war. Indeed, one thing we eventually learned about living under conditions of war, was the futility of initiating any major projects. War and displacement inevitably intervened to put an end to or destroyed any new projects and initiatives.

The Outbreak of War in Jaffna

The euphoria that gripped the Tamil nation following the commencement of peace talks in 1994/95 between the Government of Chandrika Kumaratunga and the Liberation Tigers faded when hostilities resumed on 19th April 1995 following the collapse of the peace negotiations.

Bala's recent work, *The Politics of Duplicity*⁸ provides a detailed critical examination of the underlying causes behind the breakdown of the talks.

The Sri Lankan military establishment as well as the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist forces that formed the backbone of Kumaratunga's government were opposed to peace and to any rational political settlement that might provide for regional autonomy or self rule to the Tamil people. Instead they opted for a military solution. Though Chandrika assumed power as Head of State with a mandate for peace, she swung towards the side of hard-line militarists under the façade of a strategy of 'war for peace'. While the Foreign Minister, Mr. Lakshman Kadirgamar convinced the governments of the world of the necessity of war for a permanent peace and secured substantial financial aid for a war effort, the Sri Lanka Government launched a massive arms procurement programme. The armed forces were given the go ahead to buy modern weaponry systems, irrespective of costs, in preparation for an all out war.

Bala and I were alarmed by the emerging situation. Though some of our military cadres displayed over-confidence about the military power of the LTTE in defending our controlled areas, we assumed correctly as it turned out that the Government was preparing for a major invasion of the Jaffna Peninsula and the LTTE combat units might find it difficult to contain it. Our assumption was predicated on the unprecedented and massive build-up of government troops in the Pallaly military complex. We also learned that the government had purchased new combat aircraft, tanks, artillery pieces and other heavy weaponry, which were systematically shipped to the Pallaly base from the South.

The existence of an LTTE administrated de facto state in the Jaffna Peninsula was a humiliation and a challenge to the Sri Lanka state, which claimed sovereignty over the entire island and its people. Though the LTTE allowed the functioning of certain elements of the state structure, they maintained law and order and supervised various departments of the government to eliminate inefficiency and corruption with a view of promoting public welfare. The popular support for the Tigers by the Tamil people despite the government's denouncement of LTTE's rule as autocratic and illegal, irritated Colombo. Added to the concerns of the Sinhala leadership was the LTTE's stated policy of self-determination, political independence and statehood. The Sinhalese feared that the LTTE's military expansion, its territorial conquest of Tamil homeland and its administrative capability, might eventually lead to the realisation of the Tamil aspiration for an independent Tamil state.

The military conquest of Jaffna therefore became a key project of Kumaratunga's government. If successfully accomplished, in the government's view, it would signal the demise of Tamil power in the North and bring about the downfall of the LTTE's military hegemony. The capture of Jaffna would also enhance the image of Chandrika Kumaratunga as the conqueror of the Tamil kingdom and as a champion of Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy. In spite of her pretensions as an angel of peace, President Kumaratunga opted for militarism anticipating that war and conquest of the Tamil homeland would put an end to the Tamil freedom movement

⁸Balasingham, Anton. "The Politics of Duplicity. Re-Visiting the Jaffna Talks' First Edition 2000, Fairmax Publishing Ltd.

once and for all, and at the same time earn her tremendous popularity among the nationalists and Sinhala-Buddhist hard-line constituency. Hence, she gave primacy to the objective of the military invasion of Jaffna and appointed her uncle, General A. Ratwatte, to implement the project. The hard-line and ruthless General Janaka Perera, notorious for his mass killings of Tamils during his command in the Eastern Province and Sinhalese during the JVP uprising in the 80s, was given the task of field commander for the invasion of the Jaffna Peninsula.

Although the people of Jaffna expected military operations in the Peninsula following the collapse of the negotiations, they had no idea of the scale and magnitude of the military preparations that were being undertaken by the Sri Lanka government. Thousands and thousands of combat troops and heavy weapons were being inducted into the Pallaly complex by air and sea. We later learned that about thirty to forty thousand troops were assembled from various districts of the East and South of the country for this decisive battle. But apart from the aerial and artillery bombardment, life went on as normal in Jaffna. Unaware of the massive military build-up, the people of Jaffna entertained an illusionary confidence that the LTTE fighters would successfully defend Jaffna in the event of an invasion by the Sinhalese army. Frankly, Bala and I were nervous about the impending assault. We could see that an invasion on the Peninsula would bring massive destruction of property to Jaffna. But even more worrying was the number of civilian casualties such an invasion would inflict. The prospect of an all out conventional war in the densely populated area was frightening. I felt deeply sad to think of the possibility of the cultural capital of the Tamil people falling to Sinhala occupation and domination again.

On 9th July 1995, as the first phase of the invasion of Jaffna, the Sri Lankan armed forces launched a massive military assault code-named 'Operation Leap Forward'. Thousands of well armed combat troops supported by artillery and aerial bombardment made a pincer movement towards Jaffna city. One column of troops moved from Pallaly and Tellipallai towards Alaveddy and Sandilipay, while the other advanced from Mathagal along the coastal belt of Ponnalaya towards Vaddukoddai. With limited resistance from the LTTE, the Sri Lankan troops reached the outskirts of Vaddukoddai and Sandilipay within four days. The Colombo media was jubilant, highlighting stories of dramatic military victories by the Sinhala army. But the military success of the first phase of the Jaffna invasion sent shudders through the Jaffna civilian population. So I was relieved when Bala told me that Mr. Pirabakaran was planning a major counter offensive operation to thwart the invasion. The LTTE's counter-offensive code named 'Operation Tiger Leap' was launched on 14th July 1995. LTTE commando units attacked the military concentrations at Alaveddy and Sandilipay inflicting heavy casualties. Intense fighting continued for two days. During the fighting, a Puccara combat aircraft was shot down by an LTTE surface to air missile and the naval command ship 'Ediththera' was sunk by a Black Sea Tiger near Kankesanthurai Port. Unable to resist the ferocious counter thrust by the LTTE, the government troops abandoned their offensive and withdrew to barracks.

The success of the operation 'Tiger Leap' and the significant damage inflicted on the navy and airforce generated a sense of relief amongst the Jaffna population. But they were unaware that the army's operation 'Leap Forward' was a diversionary strike to test the defensive capability

of the LTTE. The operation was also undertaken to confuse the LTTE of the possible route the Sri Lankan army might take to advance towards Jaffna city when the real offensive began.

The sense of relief and normalcy that prevailed in Jaffna following the military victory of operation 'Tiger Leap' turned out to be short lived. By the end of July 1995 the Sri Lankan armed forces began to intensify the aerial and artillery bombardment. The shelling and bombing centred on Jaffna city and its suburbs. The attacks were indiscriminate and intended to cause civilian casualties and to terrorise and demoralise the civilian population. Day by day, the artillery shelling and aerial bombing increased and eventually extended into the night. On several occasions the sound of approaching bombers woke us up and sent us running in the dark to the bunker. Jaffna town trembled under the intensity of the night bombardment. Every night was a nightmare for the people who took cover in bunkers or woke up and ran to different areas away from the shelling for safety. Our house rattled and shook from the vibrations of nearby explosions of artillery shells. I can still remember the sleepless nights and deafening noise when the boosters of shells ignited over our area. Ultimately the night shelling became so frequent we grew weary of taking cover and left it to luck as to whether a round fell on our house or not. The aerial bombardment was also indiscriminate. Although the Sri Lanka Air Force claimed it targeted LTTE military encampments the bombs always landed on civilian targets. The most infamous incident was the air strike on St Paul's church at Navalay about five kilometres from the Jaffna city. Bombs exploded amongst the displaced people who had taken refuge at the Catholic shrine. In this tragic incident on July 9th, 120 civilians - including children and the elderly - were killed and more than 150 people were seriously injured. Sri Lanka had the audacity to claim that it had successfully targeted an LTTE military camp. The denial by Sri Lanka following the mass murder added insult to injury and outraged the beleaguered Jaffna people. This horrific incident would have been blacked out behind the curtain of press censorship if the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegation had not issued an official statement confirming the civilian casualties, placing the blame squarely on the Sri Lanka Air force for the indiscriminate aerial attack. The ICRC statement revealed the nature of the savage war. Severely embarrassed by this revelation, the Sri Lanka Foreign Minister, Mr. Kadirgamar, summoned the ICRC representative to his office and warned him not to interfere in the internal affairs of the state. The other ugly incident that horrified the people of Jaffna was the aerial bombardment of Nagar Kovil Maha Vidyaklayam (High School) on 22nd September in which twenty-four students were killed and thirty-five seriously injured.

The Invasion of Jaffna and the Exodus

The military invasion we had anticipated with great apprehension started on 1st October 1995 with the launching of an offensive code-named 'Operation Thunder'. Aptly named, it began with massive artillery and aerial bombardment on Valigamam, particularly in the areas of Vasavillan, Pathameni, Atchuvelli and Puttur. After softening the LTTE's defence positions with heavy artillery barrages and aerial strikes, thousands of Sri Lankan troops attacked

LTTE positions at Vasavillan and Pathameni precipitating ferocious fighting, which continued for days, with casualties on both sides. Heavy artillery stationed at Pallaly base rained shells incessantly day and night throughout Valigamam - particularly in the Eastern sector compelling thousands of people to flee from their traditional villages. 'Operation Thunder' continued for nearly two weeks. The Sri Lankan army, ignoring the heavy casualties it suffered, overran several LTTE positions and captured the strategically important towns of Atchuvveli, Avarankal and Puttur. With the capture of these towns, we knew that the Sri Lankan army had chosen the Eastern flank of Valigamam as their route to advance towards the Jaffna city. Accordingly, the Tiger combat units built massive defence barriers in Neerveli and Kopay blocking the Jaffna-Point Pedro main road. We also knew that if Neerveli and Kopay fell, the Sinhalese troops would swiftly move across the Chemmani expanse and seize Navatkuli Bridge which links Valigamam and Thenmarachchi regions. In that eventuality, an estimated half a million people in Valigamam, including the populace of the Jaffna city, would be trapped by the army. In fact, that was precisely the strategic objective of the Kumaratunga government. We waited and watched anxiously for the next move as 'Operation Thunder' subsided and the government troops consolidated the territories that they had gained from the LTTE. We expected the next phase of the war would be decisive. The morale of our cadres was high, with a fierce determination to defend Jaffna. But we were also acutely aware that the Government troops had the manpower and firepower and displayed a strong determination to achieve their strategic objective, irrespective of the heavy casualties they suffered.

The decisive day came on the 17th October 1995 when "Operation Riviresa" (Sun Rays) got underway. The strategic target was Jaffna city. Fierce fighting flared in the Neerveli sector where the LTTE fighters were dug in and heavily concentrated. While the Tigers resisted fiercely from their defensive positions, the Sri Lankan army turned their artillery fire indiscriminately against civilian settlements in Jaffna city and its suburbs. Supersonic and Puccara combat aircraft struck at civilian areas according to the whims of the pilots. The intense aerial activity and artillery shells exploding around our area at Kokkuvil meant that Bala and I spent a large amount of our time racing between the house and the bunker about twenty yards from the front door. Our bodyguards, concerned that our house might be a possible target for aerial attack, watched the path of the bomber planes and warned us whenever a bomber started to dive close to our house. On several occasions the shock waves from exploding shells and bombs swept through our bunker tugging our hair and clothing. A sudden unexpected explosion one evening vibrated through the house, throwing up dust and bringing down loose sheeting and rattling the windows. I was thrown back against the wall of my room. My head took the full brunt of the impact and I felt as if it was to be torn from my body. I fell to the floor and shouted at Bala to keep down, anticipating a barrage of artillery shells. Our bodyguards came running with a torch to direct us in the dark to the bunker where we all waited to ensure the barrage was over. We later learned the explosion was in the neighbourhood and over ten people had died.

The entire population in Jaffna lived in fear and uncertainty. Valigamam turned into a killing field. Hundreds of people were being killed and their property destroyed under the guise of 'a

war for peace'. Neither the world media nor the international governments showed any serious concern over this monumental human tragedy.

During those dangerous times Bala spent several hours studying maps to locate the possible routes where the army might advance to reach the Jaffna city. It concerned him very much and he was deeply interested in fathoming the potential moves by the army. By studying the day-to-day events in the battle, he pointed out to me that the Sri Lankan troops would not be able to penetrate the built up areas and the network of roads and lanes where LTTE fighters were heavily entrenched. He calculated correctly as it turned out that the Sri Lankan troops might attempt to advance through the coastal region of Uppu Aru lagoon along the fields and marshy lands lying between the Jaffna-Point Pedro road and the salty lagoon that stretches from Puttur to Chemmani. The LTTE commanders were aware that the army might eventually seek this route. Unfortunately the LTTE's defence fortifications were weak in this terrain against the formidable firepower of the enemy's battle tanks.

On 29th October the Sri Lankan armed forces overran the LTTE defence lines in Neerveli in one of the bloodiest battles of 'Operation Riviresa' and the armoured columns began moving towards Kopay North, along the coastal region of the lagoon. The LTTE had mobilised several combat units to block the advancement of troops towards Kopay and heavy fighting erupted in the area. The situation was very dangerous. If the Sri Lankan troops overran the LTTE defence positions in Kopay North, they could swiftly proceed to Chemmani and capture Navatkuli Bridge trapping the population in Valigamam. The air was thick with fear and tension. Mr. Tamil Chelvan came to our residence and asked Bala and myself - along with our bodyguards to vacate our Kokkuvil house and move to Chavakachcheri where he had arranged a house for us to stay in temporarily. He also said that the Jaffna population would be informed of the situation the next morning and they would be advised to leave Valigamam before the Navatkuli Bridge fell to enemy troops. While we were hurriedly packing our bags to leave for Madduvil, a village in Chavakachcheri, an endless barrage of artillery shells rained down in the vicinity of our house indicating that the troops were closing in on Jaffna city. On our way to Chavakachcheri, our hearts sank when we saw crowds of displaced families trekking along the Kopay-Kaithaddy road fleeing from the advancing columns of Sri Lankan troops.

The following morning - 30th October - LTTE political cadres made a public announcement through loud speakers informing the people of Jaffna and other areas of Valigamam that the Sri Lankan troops were closing in on the city. Declaring that the LTTE forces were determined to resist the Sri Lankan troops and defend Jaffna, they requested the people to move to safer areas in Thenmarachchi to avoid the danger of being subjected to the enemy's ruthless firepower. The warning hit a nerve with the agitated, terror stricken population and precipitated a hasty and confused exodus from Jaffna.

The exodus was a colossal human tragedy, unprecedented in its proportions. Heeding the appeal of the LTTE cadres and realising the imminent danger to their lives from the invading enemy troops, the entire population of Valigamam - more than five hundred thousand people - stepped out onto the roads carrying their bare essentials and dragging along their children, the elderly and the sick. Everyone knew they would be safe if they could just crossover the

Navatkuli bridge into Kaithaddy, Thenmarachchi. This realisation led to a headlong rush to cross the bridge before the enemy blocked the evacuation of the Jaffna population. The roads leading to Chavakachcheri were jam-packed with masses of desperate, frightened people. Bicycles - the only mode of transport - became a burden as the movement of the multitude ground to a halt with the cramming and congestion of people. The overcrowded processions of people extended for miles and it took several hours to move a few hundred yards. Adding to the tragedy, it started to rain. Teardrops from the weeping sky provided only a tiny relief to the many thirsty, dehydrated mouths. Children cried with the agony of starvation as their parents watched helplessly. The elderly stumbled along the roads, often stopping to draw breath. Deprived of food and water and exposed to the weather, the sick became sicker. Strained and stressed by the emotional and physical upheaval of the event, a pregnant woman lay down on the side of the road to deliver her baby, unattended in the open air. Despite the physical hardships suffered by the people there was a sense of determination and urgency to escape from the clutches of an unpredictable and dangerous enemy who was nearing the gates to Jaffna.

The Sri Lankan government and its armed forces never anticipated such a mass evacuation of people from Valigamam. When they understood the scope and magnitude of the exodus and the direction of the moving multitude, they realised, to their utter dismay and frustration, that they are going to conquer a ghost city. The advancing troops could do nothing to prevent the evacuation. At one stage Air Force jets in desperation struck at the fleeing population at Chemmani killing two civilians and injuring five others. This cowardly act failed to deter the population fleeing across the bridge. Within three or four days, a population of half a million people vacated Valigamam and crossed over to the LTTE controlled Thenmarachchi.

A huge displaced population engulfed Chavakachcheri, a historic town famous for its open market and delicious fruit. Every house in the town provided shelter and refuge to relatives, friends and strangers. I know of one house where sixty people lived, stretching the water resources and toilet facilities. All over Chavakachcheri - in schools, colleges, temples, churches, coconut plantations, and mango groves people scrambled for some space where they and their families could stay. As I rode on my bicycle to the local vegetable market I was overwhelmed by the sense of urgency that filled the air. The town was packed with people and their belongings. Some people just stood, surrounded by their possessions with nowhere to go. Others squatted listlessly under trees they had claimed as their home. Small fires burned and smoke wafted eerily through the air as women struggled to cook for their hungry, tired and distressed families. Children cried and rubbed their eyes and looked around hopelessly. The elderly and sick lay on mats on the cold ground and snatched a short rest while the other family members watched over them. A deep sorrow engulfed me as I witnessed this historic tragedy. Most of these people had abandoned their elegant houses with flourishing gardens and fruit trees. Having deserted their property built up over generations of hard toil, they were now, overnight, reduced to conditions of wretchedness, faced with despair and misery. It was a sad and tragic scenario to see the proud and dignified people of Jaffna moving around aimlessly, impoverished and homeless. An entire community of people was compelled to abandon their sacred city, the cultural capital of the Eelam Tamils, where they have lived for innumerable centuries.

The life in Chavakachcheri and its surrounding villages became intolerable for the displaced Jaffna population. Faced with an acute shortage of food and medicine, deprived of proper accommodation, sanitary facilities etc, the displaced suffered extreme hardships. Adding to their misery was the artillery fire directed at random amongst them to create terror and cause casualties. The shelling also reminded the Tamil people of the imminent invasion of Thenmarachchi. Neither the Kumaratunga government nor the international governments showed any concern about the pathetic plight of the displaced. The Colombo media observed a studied silence as if nothing had happened to the Jaffna population. The media only highlighted stories of the 'spectacular' military advances of the 'brave soldiers' whose objective was to 'liberate' the people of Jaffna from the 'terrorist' LTTE. There was one lone voice that expressed concern over the exodus of the Jaffna population. The former United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali called upon the international governments to assist the uprooted Jaffna population. Fearing that this inhuman tragedy caused by the war would become internationalised, Mr. Kadirgamar, Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister acted swiftly, denying the existence of any humanitarian tragedy. In a bid to cover-up the criminality of the Sinhala state, the 'Tamil' Minister cautioned the UN Secretary General not to exaggerate the 'minor problem' of an 'internally displaced' people that concerns the 'internal affairs' of a 'sovereign state'. Mr. Kadirgamar thereby suppressed the only voice that expressed genuine concern for the plight of the displaced Jaffna Tamils.

Withdrawing to Vanni

The task of catering for the needs of half-a-million displaced people in Thenmarachchi while engaging in a defensive war against a formidable conventional army poised to take over the Peninsula, was far beyond the resources of the LTTE. Though a few commando units had penetrated into Valigamam and were able to harass the occupation army, the LTTE leadership decided to move the bulk of its forces to Vanni. The Tigers knew that the Sinhala army would soon enter Thenmarachchi and Vadamarachchi to take control of the entire peninsula and to fight a defensive war from Chavakachcheri would be suicidal for both the LTTE fighters and the over-crowded civilian population. With this realisation the LTTE had taken steps to progressively move its combat formations to Vanni. Already a section of the displaced population had moved into Vanni fearing an escalation of the war in Thenmarachchi. Though the LTTE aspired to move the displaced people into Vanni, it did not advocate or encourage such a project realising the practical difficulties in rehabilitating a massive population. Having suffered horrendously as a consequence of displacement, significant sections of the population were unsure as to whether to choose an uncertain life in Vanni or to return to their homes under an army of occupation. They waited, watching the developments of the war. But for a huge section of the Jaffna population, who openly supported and sympathised with the LTTE, there was no choice but to follow the organisation into Vanni to avoid military persecution. Bala and I were in this category. We had no choice but to move to the Vanni or die. We were waiting instructions from Mr. Pirabakaran and they came. Soon after we were on our way to

the coast. Our reliable friend Soosai got busy on the walkie-talkie giving instructions to the female Sea Tiger crew who were to pilot the boat that would take us to the Vanni. It quickly appeared on the scene and moored about one hundred yards in the shallow waters of the Kilally lagoon. We waded out, knee deep in water and bundled onto the boat. A few minutes later we were on our way across the lagoon, leaving Jaffna behind us for a totally new life in the Vanni. Our destination was the village of Visvamadu, about twenty kilometres from Killinochchi town. I couldn't even begin to imagine what to expect, but as Soosai drove us along the pot-holed dirt road an hour after our landing in the Vanni, the economic underdevelopment of the area was apparent, even in the dark of night. The route to Visvamadu was interspersed with small hamlets and vast open tracts of paddy fields and roads lined with thick jungle overgrowth.

Our stay in Visvamadu was temporary, the first in a series of residences we occupied during our displaced existence in Vanni. Visvamadu is an agricultural village of hardworking Jaffna farmers. These people had secured the land under a government colonisation scheme and had transformed an area of thick jungle into fertile patches of paddy fields and coconut plantations. We became friendly with several farming families and our life in Visvamadu was relaxed and free from the conditions of war. Killinochchi became the central commercial town teeming with the displaced population. The LTTE had established its political headquarters in Killinochchi and we regularly visited the town. On 18th April 1996 while we were still living in Visvamadu, we heard of 'Operation Riveresa 2' during which the Sri Lankan troops suddenly marched into Thenmarachchi and captured the area without resistance from the LTTE. This sudden military invasion caused chaos amongst the displaced population in Thenmarachchi. Thousands and thousands of panic-stricken people fled to Kilally to cross the lagoon to the Vanni. There were few boats available to transport a huge number of terrorised, stampeding people. The tragedy was further compounded by air strikes on the fleeing population at Kilally in an attempt to stop the evacuation of the people to Vanni. Sri Lankan bombers and helicopter gunships attacked the boats carrying civilians causing death and chaos. Trapped by the invading troops and prevented from escaping to the Vanni across the lagoon, the displaced population had no choice but to return to their abandoned homes in Jaffna. The return of the displaced to Jaffna was portrayed by the Government controlled media as a major victory for the Kumaratunga government whose troops had 'liberated' the Jaffna population from the clutches of the 'terrorists'.

Insofar as I was concerned, the return of a large number of people to Valigamam was not to be viewed as a setback, but as a positive step for the people and the struggle. Firstly, most of the people had a home of their own and a known social environment in Jaffna, which was preferable in anybody's judgement to the miserable existence in the open in Thenmarachchi. For me, the people's return to their homes would give them the opportunity to restore their dignity and self respect after facing severe and demoralising distress as displaced, dispossessed people. Equally important, in my view, it was crucial to the struggle that the people reclaim their property in Jaffna. In this way the Tamil people's residency in the peninsula maintained their claim over traditional lands and, secondly, it prevented the occupation of vacant Tamil homes and the usurping of land by Sinhalese settlements as has been the case in Trincomalee district. And thirdly, I felt it was necessary for the struggle that the people should retain

their emotional attachment to their historical birthplace. That the land was theirs and the Sinhalese were the intruders and foreign occupiers was an important sentiment to be nurtured. If anyone was to leave Jaffna it should be the Sinhalese army, not the Jaffna people.

Tragically, following the return of the majority of the displaced people to Valigamam to their abandoned homes and villages the Sinhalese occupation army, under the command of General Janaka Perera, slowly turned the Jaffna peninsula into an open prison. The so-called 'liberators' soon revealed themselves to be oppressors. The mass scale arrests, detention, torture and extra-judicial killings of civilians are documented facts. Over one thousand people have disappeared and mass graves, for example at Chemmani in Jaffna, have been uncovered. The persecution of the people of Jaffna living under Sinhala military occupation is regular news in both the local and international media.

8 Tribulations in Vanni

The LTTE's strategic withdrawal to the Vanni, in military terms, was a shrewd move by Mr. Pirabakaran. Having secured and consolidated a huge base area in the heart of Northern Sri Lanka shielded by thick, impenetrable jungles, Mr. Pirabakaran embarked on a massive programme to re-organise and re-structure the LTTE's military machine. As a sharp strategist he knew that he had to defend his jungle territory and to fight his future battles in the Vanni region. He was fully aware of the military ambitions of the Colombo leadership. Anticipating possible military invasions from the Sinhala army, he prepared to build a powerful liberation army capable of fighting both conventional and jungle guerrilla war. He launched a huge recruitment and training project aimed at strengthening the manpower and the combat capability of the LTTE forces. Once the project was completed, he planned to launch an offensive operation on a major Sri Lankan military base in the Vanni. This was planned to be undertaken in the early part of July 1996.

We knew that a lot of preparations were being made for an offensive assault. We also knew that Mr. Pirabakaran was spending sleepless nights with his senior military commanders discussing a plan for the operation. It was only at the last moment we learnt which military base it was. Studying the Sri Lankan military positions, Bala speculated correctly - that the attack could be against the Mullaitivu base. Although Bala was close to Mr. Pirabakaran, he always avoided enquiring about military plans. Once the operation was launched or a military event or an assault took place, Mr. Pirabakaran was the first to visit Bala with facts and figures to inform him of the details of the operation for the preparation of press releases for the local as well as the international media.

On 18th July 1996, the LTTE launched a massive military assault, code-named 'Unceasing Waves' on the Mullaitivu military base. It was a huge military complex, incorporating the old Mullaitivu town and encompassing an area of 2900 meters long and 1500 metres wide. Situated along the coastal belt, the base complex functioned as the command structure and administrative centre for the Mullaitivu district. Well-trained and heavily armed units of the LTTE attacked the base complex from land and sea and breached the defence perimeter after several hours of heavy fighting. Thereafter, the LTTE fighters overran several mini-camps, artillery and mortar bases and finally captured the central command buildings. Within twenty-four hours, the entire base complex fell to the LTTE. The hurriedly dispatched Sri Lankan reinforcements which opened a beach-head about five kilometres south of Mullaitivu were eventually surrounded by LTTE fighters and forced to retreat with heavy casualties. The Tigers also foiled several attempts to land reinforcements along Mullaitivu beach. The fighting lasted till 26th July when the Sri Lankan army finally withdrew the last of its shattered

reinforcements. One thousand three hundred Sri Lankan troops were killed in one of the worst military disasters suffered by the Sinhala army. The LTTE captured a huge haul of arms worth millions of dollars, including 122-mm artillery pieces and 120mm heavy mortars with thousands of shells. It was a remarkable military victory for the LTTE. Three hundred and thirty two LTTE fighters were lost.

On the final day of the battle (26th July) when the LTTE fighters were involved in clearing up the base complex and removing the arms and ammunition, Sri Lankan troops launched a lightning attack, code-named 'Sath Jeya', on Paranthan from their Elephant Pass base and captured the town. It was a diversionary attempt by the army to distract the Sinhala people who were shocked and shattered by the humiliating military debacle suffered at Mullaitivu with its unprecedented casualty figures. Having captured Paranthan town, Sri Lankan troops launched phase two of 'Operation Sath Jeya' on 4th August 1996, to capture Killinochchi town. The stiff resistance by the LTTE fighters thwarted the strategic objectives of the Sinhala troops. Only a part of the town fell to the army. The fighting continued for days. In retaliation for the huge losses suffered at Mullaitivu, the Sri Lankan armed forces opened up heavy artillery barrages and aerial bombardment, destroying the Killinochchi town and its surroundings.

During these heavy clashes in the Killinochchi sector, we were living in Ramanathapuram, an ancient, traditional village about ten kilometres from the Killinochchi town. Approximately two kilometres north of our residence, in a patch of jungle, was an LTTE training camp, which was regularly subjected to artillery and aerial assaults. Now we were back in the danger zone of a conflict area and heard the deafening sounds of war once again.

There were many nights when falling artillery shells shook our house and we were foolhardy not to take cover in the bunker. But the possibility of being bitten by one of the many poisonous snakes or scorpions that inhabited the bunker, was as real that of being blown apart by artillery shells. Our bodyguards regularly checked our deep, sandy bunker covered with palmyrah tree trunks and sandbags. One day, to our dismay, they found a big cobra skin hanging from the inside of the roof of the bunker. They were certain that somewhere in the dark spaces between the tree trunks within the roof, a cobra had made its home and probably started a family. For us, the thought of slow death from the bite of an angry cobra seemed less appealing than being blown apart in peaceful sleep. We chose the later option and left it to luck.

Apart from the shelling and bombing in the vicinity of our house, our stay in Ramanathapuram was one of our most pleasant times in the Vanni. Huge margosa trees and coconut plantations surrounded our charming house. In the front compound, every species of mango tree produced bumper harvests after our arrival. The trees made the house cool in the tropical Vanni climate and comfortable to live in. Our few neighbours were traditional Vanni people from a variety of castes who supported the struggle in one way or another. But while living in Ramanathapuram had its plus points, there was a major downside also. The last village before the Vanni jungle, we were isolated from densely populated areas and the main LTTE offices and camps. The fuel shortage and the long distance to travel to our place meant that visitors were few and far between. So, when the offensive to capture Killinochchi loomed on the horizon, we were advised to move to a different area closer to the other cadres. We moved from Ramanathapuram to live

in the historical town of Kachchilaimadu, a few miles from Oddusudan in Mullaitivu, where the memorial to the last Tamil King, Pandara Vannian still stands. The British hanged him for his resistance to colonialism.

Living in Vanni

The Vanni region of Northern Sri Lanka is a dry zone with little rainfall. The ancient Tamil kings of the Vanni kingdom developed an advanced hydraulic agricultural system by constructing hundreds of irrigation tanks in the region. In those ancient days, the Vanni farmers told me, the food production flourished and the surplus was sent to Jaffna, as well as to the Sinhala South. Foreign colonialism put an end to the hydraulic mode of agriculture, which encouraged a communal system of production and distribution. The Sinhala state that assumed power after the independence of the island deliberately alienated and isolated the Vanni region from any economic development projects. As a consequence, Vanni became increasingly underdeveloped and the network of tanks and canals built over the centuries and maintained by the kings, collapsed and disintegrated from lack of use. Several tanks disappeared as their embankments were washed away by occasional floods. With the collapse of the irrigation system, the life of the farming community in Vanni became difficult. The economic embargo imposed by the Sri Lanka state has created a different set of problems for the middle landowners.

Many farmers in Vanni live within the confines of a household economy. They have coconut trees, banana trees, chickens, goats, cows, mango trees, rice from their paddy cultivation and vegetables from their gardens. These household facilities furnish them with a better chance of survival. But the fuel shortage for tractors and water pumps and the ban on fertilisers threatened not only their survival but that of other social groups in Vanni. To overcome the ban on fuel for tractors to plough their fields, many farmers returned to the days of using bullocks for ploughing, in preparation for planting paddy. Unfortunately, while the absence of tractors placed an added burden of the farmers' labour, the ban on fertiliser meant that the crops would produce a poor yield. Furthermore, paddy crops could not be sold in either Jaffna or Colombo and often spoiled in storage. Storage problems, high cost of production and poor markets discouraged the farmers from producing more crops than was necessary, potentially adding to the shortage of food and an increase in the food prices. Many of the farmers had similar problems with the production of, for example, tobacco. Tobacco crops could not be exported to the south of the island and rotted in storage preventing the farmers from recovering their costs and creating a cash crisis for their daily living and repayment of debts. In addition to their harsh economic existence, the war that escalated into the Vanni created hitherto unknown problems of internal displacement. The invasion of Killinochchi followed by the lengthy 'Operation Jayasukuru' by the Sinhalese army to capture the A9 highway that runs through the heart of Vanni, created thousands more internally displaced people. Farmers had to seek refuge in schools, temples and camps, abandoning their houses, lands, cattle and the agricultural way of life.

When we were living in the Vanni during the middle to late nineties, we encountered three sets of populations: the local indigenous population, the displaced from Jaffna and the internally displaced Vanni people. (We learned later that almost all the internally displaced people of Vanni had returned to their lands and resumed normal lives following the liberation of Vanni areas by the LTTE during 'Unceasing Waves 3' in late 1999). The displaced Jaffna population was faced with a totally different set of problems. Having come to the Vanni with only a couple of bags of clothing, they had no housing and no work. Housing and employment opportunities were critical problems. In other words, they were compelled to start life from scratch again. Tracts of land were identified and cleared and attempts were made by the various departments of the LTTE to settle the people in colonisation schemes throughout the Vanni. Many people, asserting their independence and from personal pride, opted to find their own way. With financial assistance from abroad, they made their own arrangements, built small huts and struggled to find employment that would provide an income for them to feed their families. The poor and those without relatives abroad from whom they could seek financial help, had no option but to remain behind in the unsatisfactory and deprived environment of refugee camps, dependent on NGOs and the LTTE for assistance to survive. But many of these people, penniless and homeless and in despair, simply pitched a thick plastic sheet - given to them by the ICRC under a tree. There were many occasions when we passed by these people standing by their tents, shivering and cold and drenched to the skin as the rain poured down on them and the water turned their surroundings into a thick muddy pool. The same tragic sight swept throughout the Vanni during the malaria epidemic in 1996 and 1997. In every nook and corner, and out in the streets, sick people with nowhere to go and without medicine as a consequence of the economic embargo, shivered in the early stages of malaria. Everywhere we turned, thin, poorly nourished people moved slowly along the roads with a towel or thin bed sheet draped over their frames for warmth from the chill which preceded the fever's peak. Mothers with sick children waited at bus stops for hours in the rain or burning heat to take their children to the hospital. Columns of people could be seen stretching into the distance heading for different destinations, having found walking quicker than waiting for the bus.

Although many people took their own initiatives to find work, unemployment persisted as a major problem and the consequent financial hardship undermined the personal integrity and independence of the Jaffna people as they sank into extreme difficulties. The high cost of living and the economic embargo necessitated constraints on the spending of money on food in a great number of families. Reports of starvation in some homes filtered through and the LTTE's rehabilitation organisations acted to provide relief to these desperate families. Malnutrition was obvious by the potbellies, skinny legs, faded black hair and poor growth in many children throughout the Vanni. The shortage of medicines for the treatment of common illness as malaria, typhoid fever, and paracetamol for viral fevers added to the misery of the people and exposed them to life threatening illness.

The day to day struggle to survive made life an utter misery for thousands of the displaced. Sections of these people were compelled to go to Vavuniya seeking new pastures. But most of these people were rounded up by the Sri Lankan army and police and dumped into various refugee camps in Vavuniya. Deprived of the freedom of movement, these Tamil refugees

continue to live in the open prisons. Those who were bold enough to take a perilous journey to Jaffna or to South India had also ended up in refugee camps there.

The LTTE backed local rehabilitation organisations had been striving to meet the needs of the displaced with limited funds and resources. The Kumaratunga Government was merciless. Apart from the stringent economic embargo on food and medicine, the Government cut down on relief assistance also, forcing the displaced population to embark on anti-government demonstrations and protests: but to no avail. The Government's constraints prevented international NGOs operating in Vanni from providing adequate assistance. Allegations of collaboration were made and the people complained that the NGOs failed in their mandate to bring this humanitarian tragedy to the notice of the world. The Sri Lankan government viewed the displaced people as LTTE supporters and sympathisers and subjected them to calculated collective punishment. In view of the extreme hardships faced by the displaced population, the LTTE has been seeking, during the Norwegian peace initiative which began in early 2000, the withdrawal of the blockade on food, medicine and other essential items vital for the civilians, as a necessary pre-requisite for talks. The Kumaratunga government has shown scant concern over restoring normal civilian life to Vanni.

Apart from the indigenous farmers and the displaced population, there is a large fishing community inhabiting the coastal regions of Mullaitivu and Mannar. A section of these fisherfolk were originally refugees from Trincomalee who had settled with the locals in the Vanni in coastal villages. The ban on fuel also severely disrupted the livelihood of the fishing community of the Vanni and plunged them into abject poverty. Without fuel supplies for trawler fishing in the deep sea, the industry was virtually wiped out. Unemployed and without produce to sell on the market, the fisherfolk had no source of income and struggled to survive on coastal- water fishing. The Sri Lankan Navy has killed hundreds of Tamil fishermen when they ventured into the seas. Adding to their distress and misery, was the destruction of their huts and boats during regular aerial attacks along the coastal areas.

‘Operation Jayasukuru’

On 13th May 1997, the Sri Lankan army's infamous ‘Operation Jayasukuru’ (Victory Assured) was launched in Vanni. It was one of the most ambitious military efforts ever undertaken by the Sri Lankan military establishment. Planned for four months but spanning a period of nearly two years it also turned out to be one of the longest battles fought in South Asia. It finally ended in the gravest and most humiliating military debacle in Sri Lanka's military history. ‘Operation Jayasukuru’ opened two fronts in the heartland of Vanni. One in the Nochimoddai-Omanthai area along the A9 Kandy-Jaffna highway and the other in the Kent-Dollar farm area along Nedunkerni. The strategic objective of the operation was to capture the eighty kilometre long highway that runs through the centre of Vanni, from Vavuniya to Killinochchi. The agenda was to bifurcate Vanni into two regions and to systematically destroy all the major military bases of the LTTE, including Mr. Pirabakaran's, that were situated, according

to Sri Lankan military intelligence, in the central region of Vanni. As the operation proceeded, thousands of Sri Lankan troops backed by artillery, tanks and air support made major thrusts in the two strategic locations. The LTTE forces, which now assumed the characteristics of a conventional military, clashed with the invaders and heavy fighting broke out. As the army advanced towards Nedunkerni, artillery shells were falling in the vicinity of Katchilaimadu, compelling us to move into a house at Puthukuddiruppu, Mullaitivu.

From our house in Puthukuddiruppu the sound of heavy shelling during the exchanges of fire was a daily occurrence, as were the Air Force sorties that indiscriminately struck refugee camps and civilian areas causing heavy loss of life. So familiar were we with the sound of shelling we were able to distinguish between the various heavy artillery, the different size mortars and tank fire and the location of the fighting from the distant noise.

We knew that ‘Operation Jayasukuru’ was going to be a long drawn out battle since Mr. Pirabakaran was determined to resist the invading Sinhala army with all the military force he could assemble. Thousands of battle-hardened fighters from Batticaloa under the command of Col. Karuna were also inducted into the Vanni confrontation. But amidst the conditions of war that continued for days and months, we, as well as the people of Puthukuddiruppu, lived our lives as normally as possible. Visitors to our house often took cover along with us in the bunker, during air raids. After the attack, we surfaced again and continued our conversation and waited for news of where the bombing had taken place and the damage it had caused.

Puthukuddiruppu is a small town but with the largest population in Mullaitivu. Its name literally translates into ‘new settlement’. And so it was for many people, including us. The town, surrounded by several traditional villages, constitutes a mixture of people: farmers, fishermen and the smaller castes in between, Catholics and Hindus, residents and displaced people. People from Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Kokilai and Kokkuthoduvai moved North along the Eastern coast and found refuge in Puthukuddiruppu after being displaced during military operations by the Sri Lankan military forces, and as a consequence of racial riots or by forced Sinhala colonisation. When we went to settle in this village we found a large population of displaced Jaffna Tamils also. Our neighbours to one side living amidst the many coconut plantations, was a very poor displaced extended family from Kokilai near Nayaaru. Military operations and atrocities by the Sri Lankan military forces had compelled this family to abandon their homes in search of safety and they found a piece of land to live on in Puthukuddiruppu. Through hard work in menial tasks, the men in the family earned enough money for their destitute families to build three small thatched huts for themselves and their children and there they eked out a day to day existence. The delightful, skinny little children often brought joy to my life when their cheerful voices called through the fence “Auntie, Auntie”. “What is it,” I would call back. “Can we have some eggs from your chickens. We have a broody chicken and want to put the eggs for her to hatch,” they asked with such urgency it seemed their whole lives were hinging on me giving them the eggs. My different varieties of chickens had wandered into their homes and fascinated, they wanted some for themselves. They were thrilled when I gave all the fresh eggs to them. A month later they proudly announced how many chickens had

successfully hatched- and asked for more eggs. The breeding of chickens added to the family income and improved their diet.

At the back of our house, on a barren piece of land, was another displaced family from Jaffna. These people had pawned their family jewellery and possessions to build a small cottage. The parents and their teenage children struggled to maintain their dignity and live a decent life. A typical proud Jaffna family, they remained private, revealing their utter poverty to only a few close friends. The mother and daughter worked quietly, gathering wood for cooking and preparing simple food within their skimpy budget. With typical Tamil generosity, this lady and her daughter regularly sent me sweet rice and bananas or 'treats'. The family were strong LTTE supporters. One son and a daughter had joined the LTTE and another daughter, in her early twenties, had become a member of the Black Tiger unit. The pleadings of the mother melted the determination of the son and he left the organisation and returned to the family, but the two daughters remained LTTE members. Ultimately the poverty compelled this family to seek greener pastures abroad and they left to start a new life in India leaving their cute, white Pomeranian dog in my care.

Our other neighbours were members of one of the oldest, original Puthukuddiruppu families. Although constituted by a diverse population, two or three families predominated in the Puthukuddiruppu social structure. These extended Vellala caste families were essentially property owners. Practising Hindus, they intermarried according to the Tamil rules of endogamy and exogamy. Observing the practices and beliefs of the ancient Tamils, these people's daily lives centred on the temple and religious functions. Nevertheless, the people allowed me into their lives and often asked me to attend their social functions. The lady of the house regularly cooked for the many religious festivals at the nearby temple. Invariably, her ten-year-old son would appear at my kitchen door with a small dish of food his mother had sent over to me. Her husband gave Bala sacks of peanuts for him to feed the dozens of squirrels that played happily around his office and our two peacocks, Siva and Sathi. This family was closely related to Mr Pararajasingham (Para as we call him) the head of the LTTE judiciary and a close family friend of ours, who lived nearby.

Our house in Puthukuddiruppu, situated in the midst of a four- acre coconut and cashew plantation had a special atmosphere. It was a sanctuary to a myriad of pets and animals, birds and reptiles also. Nothing except perhaps the stray cobra was allowed to be harmed or killed within the confines of our house and most of the animals eventually seemed to be aware of that. Squirrels abounded and peacocks strolled leisurely, stray dogs often visited hoping for something to eat and cats came and went. Birds built their nests and hatched their young in absolute security. The banana trees we planted thrived on the water that ran off during bathing and washing of clothes at the well. A circular thatched cottage under a huge mango tree and bordered by coconut trees was built as an office for Bala and it was here, in this friendly, peaceful environment we received most of our visitors. Our house was the centre for a multitude of social relationships. Because our security system was less rigid cadres from various sections of the LTTE and the public visited for diverse reasons and with many problems. Indeed, most cadres and the public knew that Bala formed a bridge between

themselves and Mr. Pirabakaran. Bala patiently listened to special requests and concerns and many problems. If solving the problem was beyond his authority, the issue would be taken up and solutions found in discussions with Mr. Pirabakaran. Secrets and intrigues were revealed, ambitions and frustrations were often expressed and advice was much sought after; there was plenty of laughter and tears were few in our house.

Pirabakaran in My View

Mr. Pirabakaran was a frequent visitor to our house; in both an official and personal capacity. He would come alone with his bodyguards and on other occasions with his family. By mid 1998 we had known and lived with the legendary leader of the Tamil liberation struggle Vellupillai Pirabakaran for twenty years. During those years of personal and political relationship we have been deeply involved in experiences with him that led to an understanding and insight into one of the most complex and commanding personalities determining the politics of Sri Lanka. Those twenty years of relationship embraced an epoch in the struggle during which we walked through many good times together and traversed and triumphed over periods of adversity in both his political and personal life. Over this span of time we had seen the ideals of freedom of a young militant progressively transforming into a concrete reality. Parallel to the march towards the liberation of his people, Mr. Pirabakaran has emerged as a living symbol of national freedom and has grown in adoration to become a venerated figure amongst his oppressed people.

Security concerns have compelled Mr. Pirabakaran to adopt what many have mistakenly labelled a 'reclusive' life style. His secluded existence under conditions of continued war and his inaccessibility to the media have made him the most misunderstood and feared guerrilla leader of our times. He has, of course, become most successful and popular in his spectacular military campaign. His military ability has often perplexed the many professional military minds in the world. So what is it that has earned this short, stocky, neat man so much love from his people on the one hand, and notoriety from the world on the other? How do we account for the contradiction in his people's perception of him, and the vilification by the world?

Mr. Pirabakaran, born in the coastal village of Valvettiturai on 26th November 1954 was a sixteen-year-old teenager when he took up arms and became involved in the political struggle of his people. He was, in other words, a 'child soldier' if we use the language of today. From those early days he has never lived a 'normal' life. As his commitment deepened, he mobilised and organised a group of radical youth who shared his views into an underground guerrilla organisation and launched an armed resistance campaign. His daring guerrilla attacks brought him to the attention of the state authorities and he became a 'wanted' man living an underground life in Jaffna. His bold armed challenge to the might of the Sinhala state earned Mr. Pirabakaran a noble reputation and he became a heroic figure amongst his people. The shrewdness and intelligence he successfully deployed in challenging the state was viewed by the people as their triumph and an assertion of their pride and identity. Mr. Pirabakaran's

sustained and successful armed resistance against mounting state oppression has earned him the mantle of national leader of the Tamil people's struggle for freedom and independence. This noble objective fuels his passion and dominates his spirit. The struggle has become his life and he has become the struggle.

Although Mr. Pirabakaran would never make any pretensions to being a theorist or an ideologue, his politics place him squarely in the camp of a patriotic nationalist. Mr. Pirabakaran's nationalism is not a manifestation of Tamil chauvinism or racism, as many Sinhala critics would like to argue. His national sentiment arose from a determination to resist Sinhala racist oppression that aims at the destruction of his people. In other words, the racism of the Sinhala state made him a fierce patriot, a passionate lover of his oppressed nation. His deep love for his people, their culture and more specifically - their language, fuels his dedication and determination to secure their survival. For him, uncluttered by abstract concepts and theories, the problem confronting the Tamil people is clear-cut and simple and the struggle for freedom is just. His psyche is deeply rooted in the soil of his motherland, the Northeast, which he always refers to as Tamil Eelam. He has an unshakeable view that his people have a right to live in peace, dignity and harmony in their historic homeland. His perception of Tamil Eelam is neither secessionist nor expansionist. For him, Tamil Eelam belongs to the Tamils and they have the sovereign right over their territory. Indeed, he has neither demonstrated nor articulated any aspiration to annex traditional Sinhala territory nor does he dream of an expansionist greater Eelam as projected by some Indian critics.

Mr. Pirabakaran has always maintained individuality and creativity in fashioning the mode of the armed struggle of the Tamil people. Though he was familiar with the history of the national liberation struggles and freedom moments of the other countries of the world, he did not embrace or capitulate to any established models or theories of liberation warfare. For him, methods of struggle should evolve from the objective conditions unique to each struggle. He devised his own methodology of warfare suited to the necessities and conditions of the struggle of his people. Some of his methods and tactics of warfare have earned him severe condemnation, particularly among the Sinhala political and military analysts. Yet he has defended his 'ruthless' tactics as a necessary means to protect his weak and small nation of people against a strong, powerful and ruthless enemy.

Mr. Pirabakaran is an activist. He believes human action is the propelling force of history. His commitment to action rather than abstract theoretical analysis of problems has been the crucial mobilising force in the growth and development of the organisation he founded. Disillusioned by the vacuous words of mainstream Tamil politicians, many young people admired Mr. Pirabakaran for his disdain for the duplicity of their politics and his active politico-military campaign to achieve his objectives. And to a large extent and against even greater odds, Mr. Pirabakaran has been successful in creating a Tamil national army capable of resisting Sinhala state oppression. And while at this stage of the struggle - he has not achieved his ultimate political objective, if it were not for the brilliant planning and execution of the armed campaign conducted by Mr. Pirabakaran, the organisation he has built up over the last twenty five years the LTTE and the Tamil people as an identifiable national formation

would have been wiped out of the island many years ago. This I concluded from my lived experience with the struggle, and it is the widely held view amongst the Tamil people. But while Mr. Pirabakaran prioritised the necessity of armed struggle to achieve political goals, Bala's intervention enhanced the political dimension of the armed struggle. The relationship between these two single-minded individuals has been unique. It is one of those relationships where two different personalities come together at a specific conjuncture and play significant roles in the movement of history.

Bala has always viewed his role with the LTTE and the struggle as the advisor and theoretician to Mr. Pirabakaran and the organisation. Bala's lack of concern for power, his preparedness to restrain his role to writing, teaching and advising, and his obvious commitment to the struggle, eventually made Bala the most reliable and trustworthy advisor to Mr. Pirabakaran. One quality that Mr. Pirabakaran has admired and valued in Bala all these years, is his commitment to truth. Bala has always acted on the principle that he should convey accurate and truthful advice in the best interests of both Mr. Pirabakaran and the struggle. Whether Mr. Pirabakaran has always heeded the advice or was displeased by what he frankly conveyed, was not Bala's concern. As the advisor to Mr. Pirabakaran, Bala has many times told me, it was his duty to tell the truth, regardless of how unpalatable it may be.

And it was at the personal level one can gain more insight into Mr. Pirabakaran. Contrary to the perception widely projected abroad, Mr. Pirabakaran is a warm and sociable person. In fact if there was one word to sum up Mr. Pirabakaran in the social and personal context, it would be 'gregarious'. Mr. Pirabakaran loves to converse. He is interested in many issues and holds strong views. On some views I do differ. One of his favourite interests is science and he encourages the cadres to learn new technologies and scientific knowledge. Another interest of Mr. Pirabakaran is Tamil culture. He has encouraged cultural expression in many forms in the organisation and society. Indeed cultural programmes constitute an important part of training camp life and most cadres are expected to participate and contribute at one level or another. The development of Tamil liberation literature and arts has always enjoyed the wholehearted support of Mr. Pirabakaran. But most of all, Mr. Pirabakaran is a connoisseur of good food. He himself has always shown a special interest in cooking different foods, and over the years he has developed a discerning taste. He views cooking as an art and eating a basic pleasure in life. He has often found it difficult to understand how my interest in food can be limited to fresh vegetables. Nevertheless, he has always been considerate enough to prepare food to my taste whenever I have visited his family for a meal. Without fail, before his departure from our house, he would enquire about our diet. He regularly relieved me of the burden of cooking by sending Bala food from his kitchen and when he cooked for functions for his cadres. For me, a vegetarian, he thought hard before deciding on a tasty dish he could prepare for me. Not infrequently, he had his cooks prepare a special vegetarian dish and sent it over to our house along with Bala's food.

Clearly Mr. Pirabakaran's has an extraordinary interest in military matters. But it is not the simple things of uniforms and weapons and technology of war which attracts this man to a military lifestyle. It is, in my perception of him, certain military principles that Mr. Pirabakaran

values as central to decent living also. These principles form part of his wider social philosophy. The most important of these being discipline. Discipline, in Mr. Pirabakaran's perspective, is a central concept in life. It governs his role as leader of a politico-military structure, his personal life and his view of society.

In his personal life Mr. Pirabakaran is disciplined in all dimensions. There has never been, from the outset of his days in struggle, a whisper of impropriety or scandal surrounding him. He has never smoked or taken alcohol and prefers if other people don't. The only person in the organisation whom he tolerated smoking was Bala, and that was in deference to his age and the personal respect he held for him. On visits to our house he often teased Bala about his unhealthy habit. He also showed his repulsion for the smell of cigarette smoke and Bala avoided smoking in front of him.

Courage in human beings is, for Pirabakaran, an admirable trait. He admires and respects manifestations of bravery, not only in his cadres, but people in general. Courage is inextricably linked to a positive and certainly inspiring feature of his character, which is that of not being subdued or deterred by anything in life, no matter how formidable and powerful it maybe. He has an indomitable will and confidence that anything can be achieved if the mind is applied and focused on the project. It is not insignificant that one of his favourite sayings is 'Who dares wins'. I inquired from Bala as to what he viewed as the quality he admired most in Mr. Pirabakaran. The unique characteristic that Bala appreciated in Pirabakaran's personality was his supreme self-confidence in times of adversity. Pirabakaran has always displayed, Bala observed, a firm, resolute and unflagging confidence in pursuit of the cause of his people. Pirabakaran believes in 'Dharma' the law of righteousness. His inner determination and confidence arise from the belief that the cause of his people is right, fair and just and therefore will eventually succeed, Bala explained.

But apart from being a political figure and a friend to many, Mr. Pirabakaran is also a family man. 'On duty' twenty-four hours of the day, every day of his life, he has had to balance his responsibilities between the struggle with his obligations as a husband and father. Arguably, his wife Mathy has made the greatest sacrifice and has not enjoyed the companionship of her husband on the level she would have preferred. Mathy's constant care of the children obviously places her in a position to have greater influence over them. But the Pirabakaran family could never be classified as 'normal'. Being the wife and children of Mr. Pirabakaran locates them in a unique social position and determines their lifestyle and relationships. Uppermost in both Mr. Pirabakaran and Mathy's mind is the security and future of their children. Hence, both Mathy and Mr. Pirabakaran, as is consistent with Jaffna parental thinking and aspirations, encourage the children in their educational pursuits. Mathy in particular has spent many hours privately tutoring her children at home and she fosters in them a healthy passion for knowledge. But his family is lifeblood to Mr. Pirabakaran. On many occasions when he is 'off' duty he visits our house with Mathy and their three children, Charles, born in 1985, Towaraha one year younger, and Balachandran, who was an unexpected addition to the family in 1996. I had no idea when I helped Mathy deliver her first son that he would grow to resemble Mr. Pirabakaran not only in looks, but in characteristics also. Towaraha, the only girl, is

more serious and studies well. The last child, although with Mr. Pirabakaran's features and obviously a favourite in the family, had not grown sufficiently when I left the Vanni for me to comment on his personality.

LTTE Weddings

We often met Mr. Pirabakaran and Mathy at the many social functions held by the various sections within the organisation and at weddings. In fact some of our happiest days were spent at these functions since they afforded us the opportunity for reunions with cadres and commanders we might not have seen for many months. Weddings were particularly frequent as the senior cadres - men and women - fell in love and wanted to marry. The LTTE weddings are functions with a progressive content combining the positive elements in Tamil culture and disavowing the more reactionary aspects. For example, LTTE wedding ceremonies are simple, amounting to the pledging of wedding vows and the signing of a register and without religious rituals. Nevertheless, the bride wears the traditional 'koorai' or red wedding sari, and the bridegroom wears the white *verti* and shirt. The 'thali', the symbol of marriage for women in Tamil culture, is tied around the neck of the bride by the bridegroom, but a few changes have been introduced. The traditional gold chain from which the 'thali' normally hangs has been replaced by a simple yellow thread, and the actual 'thali' is a square piece of gold with the symbols of Tamil culture carved into it, replacing the traditional religious insignia. The break with the traditional flamboyant and expensive weddings was seen as a breath of fresh air.

The entourage of female cadres who attended to assist and support the bride were usually led on these occasions by Vidusa, the most senior women's military commander. Less assertive in the social world than on the battlefield, Vidusa's broad smile always indicated her pleasure at seeing the young female fighters under her command, getting married. Vidusa was often surrounded by her senior colleagues on these occasions. Amongst them was Thanikai Chelvi, who led the women's wing military campaign in Jaffna after the occupation by the Sri Lankan army. Thanikai Chelvi was a widely experienced cadre who gained a comprehensive knowledge of the social problems of Tamil women when she worked in the political section in Jaffna and the Vanni. My experience of living an underground life during the occupation of Jaffna by the IPKF, meant that Thanikai Chelvi and I had much to share when we discussed her underground life in occupied Jaffna. Slimly built, this smiling, undaunted young woman lived on a knife edge when she functioned underground in Jaffna surrounded by enemy troops. Ironically, her death came, not in the dangerous underground world of Jaffna, but while leading a contingent of female fighters in battle in Mannar in 2000.

The wedding ceremonies were usually held at one of the LTTE offices followed by either snacks or a meal afterwards. Laughter and joking filled the fresh night air under star filled skies as friends and colleagues enjoyed the good will at the wedding. Attending these functions would be such people as Dr. Pathmalojini, the first doctor to join the LTTE and my close friend during my time in Jaffna and the Vanni. I first met Pathma just after the war with the IPKF

broke out when she was working in the Oorani hospital in Valvettiturai. Some of our wounded cadres had been admitted to the hospital and she was attending to them. When I went to visit the injured she expressed concern that the Indian troops might arrest her and she asked me to arrange for an ampoule of cyanide for her to carry. She continued to take risks, attending to wounded LTTE cadres in secret hideouts until she was eventually arrested by the IPKF and subjected to psychological torture. The Indian army released her after public protests in front of the camp in which she was being held. Nevertheless, her experience with her IPKF captors failed to break her will and she consistently and without hesitation continued to treat the injured LTTE cadres both at the battlefield and in the LTTE hospitals. Padma took more work on her shoulders when she started to teach the LTTE cadres basic medical procedures and nursing care. She spent her free time in service to the public. She eventually married Mr. Karikalan, the former deputy head of the political section.

To ensure the success of these wedding functions as well as other important occasions, Mr. Pirabakaran delegated the task to Mr. Tamil Chelvan, head of the political section. Mr. Tamil Chelvan was one of the youngest cadres to join the struggle in those early days in 1984. It was his passion for the struggle, coupled with his dedication, which caught the eye of Mr. Pirabakaran. Following his military training, Mr. Pirabakaran inducted Tamil Chelvan into his inner circle by recruiting him as one of his most trusted bodyguards. In terms of the struggle Tamil Chelvan is a contemporary of Sornam having functioned as a bodyguard to Mr. Pirabakaran. He was promoted to the post of commander of Tenmarachchi, where he was faced with the challenge of leading the resistance against the occupying Indian army. He succeeded in this task and was rewarded with the post of Commander of Jaffna where he engaged in many battles in the defence of the peninsula. Tamil Chelvan also wears his battle scars from the several occasions he has been wounded. The most dangerous injury that threatened his life occurred when shrapnel from exploding aerial bombs shattered his leg. With his limb hanging from his body and bleeding profusely, Tamil Chelvan was on the brink of death when he arrived at the Jaffna hospital for resuscitation treatment. Miraculously he survived his injuries and, after a long period of recuperation and learning to walk with the support of a walking stick, he resumed his duties. Tamil Chelvan was promoted as head of the political section following the Mathaya scandal and Kittu's unfortunate death at the hands of the Indian navy. He remains at the post.

As a trusted confidante of Mr. Pirabakaran, Tamil Chelvan's work has steadily expanded to include, apart from his many responsibilities as the leader of the political wing of the LTTE, the task of arranging LTTE's functions, including the weddings. Assisting him was Sudha, the head of Tamil Chelvan's administrative structure, a tireless and creative worker. Tamil Chelvan delegated to Sudha the responsibility of attending to our care and maintenance while we were in Jaffna and in Vanni. With Mr. Tamil Chelvan's interest and Sudha's skills our life in both Jaffna and the Vanni was made that much easier. Tamil Chelvan was generous to us and made every effort to ensure that we were relatively comfortable. He regularly sent me fruit and vegetables that he ordered specially from Vavuniya town. In recognition of Bala's lengthy history with the organisation, his experience and wide knowledge, Tamil Chelvan always consulted Bala and valued his advice on wide ranging issues. Bala supported Tamil

Chelvan with his intellectual input into the political work. He was often a visitor to our house to discuss political issues and quite often for a meal. His favourite dish was my white fish curry (sothi), from which he enjoyed eating the cooked head of the fish.

Heroes of the Liberation War

Senior commanders respected by the LTTE cadres and the Tamil people as war heroes of the liberation struggle were amongst the visitors to our home. One such commander was Soosai, Sea Tiger Commander. Soosai, hailing from the fishing village of Polygandy in Vadamarachchi was very close to Bala and I. Our relationship with Soosai extends as far back as the days of the Indian occupation of Jaffna when we were under ground in Vadamarachchi. We renewed our contact during our stay in Vadamarachchi in 1990 after our return to Jaffna following the negotiations with the Premadasa government. Soosai was in charge of the Vadamarachchi sector before he became the Sea Tiger commander. It was during these days Bala helped to arrange Soosai's wedding.

Soosai thrived in his role as commander of the Sea Tiger unit and this was apparent by the success he has achieved in building up the naval wing of the LTTE. Soosai is a trustworthy confidante of Mr. Pirabakaran. Having realised the strategic importance of naval power in the Eelam War, Mr. Pirabakaran helped Soosai in every way to build up the Tamil naval unit. With the combination of Pirabakaran's passion and creativity and Soosai's hard work and administrative ability the LTTE's naval wing became an effective maritime fighting force posing a serious challenge to the Sri Lankan Navy. The Sea Tiger Unit, under the able command of Soosai, has been involved in several sea battles inflicting severe damage on the Sri Lankan naval fleet and has also made remarkable contributions in land battles by several strategic sea landings of LTTE troops.

But apart from naval battles and transporting cadres, the Sea Tigers have a small unit that engages in fishing for the organisation and Bala was a beneficiary of their catch. Bala enjoys eating the freshest of fish, so he often indulged himself when Soosai sent fish straight from the beach to our house for his lunch.

Essentially a sociable and affable human being, Soosai is popular amongst the people for his sympathetic, just and down to earth approach. It is perhaps his affability and apparent generosity of spirit that won the heart of Sudha, Soosai's devoted wife. Sudha and Soosai, and their two small children, Sindhu and Manniarasan, were always generous in sharing their family warmth and affection with us on the many occasions when we visited them for meals and on their visits to our house. Sudha, from Uddupitty, Vadamarachchi, is the sister of Shankar, the LTTE cadre whose death anniversary is celebrated as Heroes' Day. Sudha's quiet, confident and calm demeanour brings joy and serenity within the family.

Another legendary figure in the Tamil struggle for freedom that visited our house is the towering figure and personality of Sornam. Sornam's history in the LTTE dates back to the mid 80s

when he was one of Mr. Pirabakaran's bodyguards. As a young man he regularly visited our house in Chennai in the capacity of a trusted assistant to Mr. Pirabakaran. During the period of the IPKF his military potential, extraordinary courage and obvious administrative talents revealed themselves and pushed Sornam up the ranks in the military structure culminating in the most trusted role in charge of Mr. Pirabakaran's personal security. The respect and admiration Sornam enjoyed from the cadres under his direct command and within the organisation was apparent whenever Sornam came within their presence. Contributing to the widely held love and respect for him was his obvious readiness to lead from the front and to share the ordeals of war and to maintain the discipline of the troops under his command. Sornam has led the LTTE fighters to many victories in battle and has been injured on several occasions. It was distressing for us to see this gentle giant struggling in the Jaffna General Hospital with serious chest and arm injuries he received during major battles in the North.

Apart from his own personal security, Mr. Pirabakaran delegated to Sornam the responsibility of our protection whilst we were living in Valigamam. A team of selected cadres from Mr. Pirabakaran's personal bodyguards was deployed at our home for our security requirements. Sornam visited our house regularly to review and advise us on our security situation and to attend to the needs and welfare of the cadres. Six feet and two inches tall and solidly built, Sornam presented a gallant figure immaculately dressed in his fatigues. His general ease and confidence underplayed the enormous military responsibilities he carried.

After many years of risking his life in the battlefield and twenty four-hour service to Mr Pirabakaran and the organisation, it was a happy day for us when we were attended his wedding. His bride was the lovely Jenny, third in command of the women's military wing. Jenny escaped death when her house received a direct hit by Sri Lankan aerial bombardment during 'Operation Riversa'. She was expecting her first child. Sornam was not in the house but on the battlefield defending Jaffna from the advancing Sinhala troops at the time of the incident. Later, in the Vanni, Sornam's work often took him away from Jenny to Trincomalee for long periods and we often visited her home to lift her spirits during these days of anxious separation. They have remained a happy couple with two little girls.

Banu and Theepan, military commanders of enormous courage and astute operational ability are worthy recipients of the respect and admiration of the organisation. Banu, as the former Commander of Jaffna is reputed for his selfless disregard for his own well being in the battlefield. As the commander of the Kittu Artillery Unit, Banu has trained his contingents to a high degree of professionalism and contributed to the development of the LTTE combat formations into an effective conventional force. The artillery and mortar units under his command expanded rapidly and secured remarkable victories in several crucial battles in the liberation war. Banu often helped Bala in his study of the warfront by providing him with comprehensive maps from which he could follow the military developments in the battlefield. With Bala, as a great teller of jokes, and Banu, as a man who relishes subtle wit, the meetings between the two in Bala's office were full of laughter.

Theepan, another senior commander from the Vanni, with considerable military experience, is soft spoken and unassuming. So renowned is his reputation and the respect for his military

ability in the movement, one is struck by his apparent humbleness in dealing with people. His presentation belies a brilliant strategist and steely, determined man and it is these qualities which inspire and exhort the cadres under his command to greater efforts in the battlefield. His visits to our house usually involved a realistic exposition from Theepan concerning the military situation in exchange for an exposition of the developments in the political sphere from Bala.

Of the military commanders, one person whom we met infrequently but nonetheless shared a mutual respect for, was the veteran military commander Balraj. Incredible as it may seem, this fighting hero is a reserved man. Balraj is known, loved and respected not only for his legendary military successes and undisputed and abounding courage, but also for his utter commitment and devotion to the cadres under his command. Sensitive and respectful of the sacrifice and tribulations they have endured, Balraj opts to spend as much time as possible in the camps with them. A measure of Balraj's courage revealed itself to us when shrapnel smashed his right leg in the Yarl Devi battle in 1993. A decision not to amputate the limb was made and Balraj suffered the excruciating pain of limb repair. On our visits to Balraj in the Jaffna hospital the pain showed in his distressed face as he acknowledged the agony the injury was subjecting him to. Compounding his healing problems was unstable diabetes. After many months in bed and a great deal of pain, Balraj eventually walked again on his leg, but the injury left him with a permanent limp and recurrent wound infection. Nevertheless, he has viewed his injury as insignificant in comparison with suffering and the sacrifices of his cadres and continues to function as a field commander in the war zone to this day.

Among the close confidantes of Mr. Pirabakaran who visited our house, albeit less frequently, was the incomparable Tamilenth. Tamilenth has been a right hand man of Mr. Pirabakaran since the earliest days, and over the years their relationship has grown and deepened. Throughout these long years in the inner circle of Mr. Pirabakaran, Tamilenth has been essentially responsible for the finance section, handling billions of rupees without any hint of impropriety on his part. For Mr. Tamilenth, the finances are as important to the success of the struggle as are the weapons and it is with the same responsibility that he has managed the finance department over the years under extreme hardships. Indeed it has been at the cost of much criticism from within the various departments of the movement for his rigorous and scrupulous distribution of the organisation's funds.

Tamilenth's passion for ancient Tamil literature and ethical philosophy of 'Thiruvalluvar' and his lamentation of the corruption of the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu, earned him the reputation as a Tamil purist. Nevertheless, despite what could be called his 'eccentricities', Tamilenth is a thoughtful and cultured gentleman behind his tough exterior. As a man who has lost three brothers to the struggle and has a tremendous respect for the enormous sacrifices made by the cadres and the people, Tamilenth views the creation of an independent Tamil state as the inalienable right of the Tamil people.

A less frequent visitor to our house but nonetheless a young woman with whom we had contact and who was worthy of respect and admiration was the extraordinary commander Vidusa.

Vidusa is from a conservative Brahman family in Jaffna. Her unassuming and modest presentation belies a truly exceptional young woman. I met Vidusa in the women's commando training camp in the Alampil jungles during the Premadasa talks. She held no particular rank in those early days of her joining the organisation. But since her deployment in the battlefield from 1990 onwards, Vidusa has demonstrated remarkable courage and leadership qualities which have taken her up through the ranks of the LTTE women to the post of Colonel: on a par with the most senior male commanders. In terms of national liberation struggles and women's role in both guerrilla and conventional war, Vidusa's history of over a decade of continuous battlefield experience and military leadership establishes her as one of the most remarkable and commendable women soldiers in military history. Certainly Vidusa is one of the most experienced cadres in the entire LTTE military structure having spent a decade in successive battles commanding the women fighters and sharing their lives on the front lines.

Of our friends and regular visitors, there were those who brought to our home a diversity of views, critical opinions as well as laughter. One of them, well known in literary circles and close friend was Puthuvai Ratnathurai the 'poet laureate' of the LTTE and a man of enormous personality. Puthuvai viewed all issues seriously and formed strong opinions on most subjects. In his social location as a sculptor, Puthuvai's worldview was formed around the centre of Tamil culture the temple. His profound knowledge of Tamil cultural practices and language meant that I had in his friendship a person capable of explaining many of the ways and meanings of Tamil life. A particularly endearing dimension of Puthuvai's personality was his fearless assertion of his right to speak his mind and it is from Puthuvai's mouth some of the liveliest and most perceptive criticisms flowed. So too did his humour. Couched in his subtle use of language, Puthuvai could always be relied on to bring laughter to our meetings. On our many visits to each other's houses Puthuvai would pull out his pile of betel leaves, give one to me and then prepare his 'betel'. And so many cool evenings have passed with Puthuvai entertaining us with his wit and humour as he smoothed the lime paste onto his betel leaf, piled on the aracan shavings, rolled the leaf and pushed it into his mouth and chewed till his lips turned red.

Puthuvai was in charge of the cultural section of the LTTE and the supervisory editor of the literary magazine 'Vellichum'. It was to this publication that Bala wrote many articles in Tamil. Writing under the pen name of 'Bramagnani', Bala wrote a series of articles on philosophy, sociology and politics. It was Puthuvai's encouragement that led to my book on the dowry system, 'Unbroken Chains' being translated into Tamil and published in a series of articles in 'Vellichum'. Puthuvai is famous for his writing of poetry, or more specifically, poetry of the people. His writings are renowned for the emotional and realistic depiction of the day to day life of the Tamil people and the liberation struggle and a use of the Tamil language that is both accessible and poetic. Famous also are his many liberation songs, which are widely heard and sung by the people throughout the land.

Other personal friends who visited us regularly were Ravindran (Ravi) a senior cadre and editor of 'Viduthalai Puligal' (Liberation Tigers) the monthly official organ of the LTTE and Jeyaraj, the editor of 'Elanatham' the LTTE's daily newspaper. Both Ravi and Jeyaraj relied

heavily on Bala's advice and direction on the official policy of the organisation. Jeyaraj visited our house daily to acquaint himself with the developments in the battlefield as well as for political views. Ravi had to write monthly reviews of events both militarily and political for which he had to consult Bala. Some sensitive articles on military operations were sent to Mr. Pirabakaran for his endorsement. Occasionally Bala wrote theoretical articles explaining LTTE's policy orientation towards various social issues. Both Ravi and Jeyaraj sought Bala's guidance because of his position as theoretician as well as his wide journalistic experience. Furthermore, through his personal contacts with Mr. Pirabakaran, Tamil Chelvan and the field commanders, Bala could provide the news and analysis of the on-going politico-military developments.

Ravi's wife Shobana, a former LTTE cadre, was known to us from her frequent visits when she worked on the women's wing monthly journal 'Suthanthira Paravaikal' (Birds of Freedom). Jeyaraj is married to Ganga, a teacher in Puthukuddiruppu High School. Both the couples became close friends of ours and they regularly visited us.

The War Continues

The battle of 'Jayasukuru' with its strategic design of opening a land route to Jaffna Peninsula via the A9 highway, bifurcating the jungle heartland of Vanni, came to a grinding halt at Mankulam after eighteen months of bloody and savage fighting. Fiercely determined to thwart the Sri Lankan army, the LTTE forces offered intense resistance and launched counter-offensives in the rear as well as in the flanks of the advancing columns along the highway. The intensity of the LTTE assaults were such that the Sri Lankan army suffered extremely high casualties and became demoralised. It has been estimated that Government troops suffered ten thousand casualties 3000 dead and 7000 wounded in this drawn out battle. The Vanni jungles are familiar ground to the Tigers where they fought and survived a war with the fourth largest army in the world. Operating in familiar militarily advantageous terrain, with extensive experience in jungle warfare, the LTTE fighters posed a serious challenge to the Sri Lankan troops. With the capture of a huge arsenal from the Mullaitivu military complex, Mr. Pirabakaran developed artillery, mortar and anti-tank units that were effectively deployed against the 'Jayasukuru' troops. In a move to strengthen the defensive capability of the LTTE in the Vanni, Mr. Pirabakaran inducted the Jayanthan Brigade, an elite battle experienced unit from Batticaloa under Colonel Karuna, into the war in Vanni. The brigades of Jayanthan, Charles Anthony, Imbran Pandian, Malathy, Sukanja, the best of the combat units of the LTTE were mobilised under the field commanders Colonel Karuna, Colonel Theepan, Colonel Balraj, Colonel Banu and Colonel Vidusa against the Sinhala invasion force of 30,000 troops including the U.S trained 53 and 55 Divisions of the Sri Lankan army. The battle triggered by 'Jayasukuru' was fierce and took place over a long period. Despite the mighty fire power at their disposal - including the air power- the Sri Lankan armed forces failed to achieve their strategic objective. The troops were bogged down for months in the strategic

towns of Pulliyankulam and Kanagarayankulam where the LTTE fighters constructed impenetrable defensive fortifications and offered stiff resistance. It was during the ferocious fighting in these strategic towns that the Sri Lankan army suffered heavy casualties and hundreds of troops from elite commando units perished. After eighteen months of bitter fighting, the Sinhalese army edged nearer to Mankulam town yet still found it impossible to breach the LTTE's defensive perimeters there. On 27th September 1998 the Liberation Tigers launched operation 'Unceasing Waves 2', overrunning Killinochchi town, and its environs. It was during the Killinochchi battle when the LTTE re-deployed some of its elite commando formations, that the Sri Lankan troops were able to capture Mankulam, weakened as a result. Nevertheless the fall of Killinochchi was a major military debacle for the Government troops. It was also a severe blow to the government's strategic plan to open up a land route to Jaffna. Jayasukuru's tortuous journey along the A9 highway came to a permanent halt at Mankulam.

Our life in Puthukkudiruppu, Mullaitivu went on as usual while the bloodiest of battles raged in the distance. The thunder of artillery fire became part of our lives. Random air strikes and naval bombardment of the Mullaitivu coastal area were regular occurrences. We received daily news on the progress of the battles from Mr. Pirabakaran's office. Bala in turn passed it on to the local media. Either Mr. Pirabakaran or one of his field commanders provided a full picture of the war situation on visits to our place during intervals of the fighting. Dinesh, a senior cadre and the administrative head of the 'Eelanatham' daily paper often undertook perilous journeys to the 'Jayasukuru' battle field and came out with detailed stories of the war.

The successful campaign against 'Jayasukuru' by the Jayanthan Brigade under Karuna's command earned him widespread popularity and respect from the LTTE cadres as well as from the people of Vanni. But apart from his military skills, Karuna has a passion for learning and, on his own effort, has studied English which enables him to read widely on many issues, particularly military science and political commentaries. And so when Karuna visited our house he was armed with many political questions. And so was Bala. Bala would dig out all the details from Karuna of the strategies and tactics of the defensive war in the Vanni. The Batticaloa cadres brought with them warmth and frankness in their relationships with others which was truly welcome. It is because the conditions of state oppression in the Eastern Province are extremely harsh, fierce and mercilessly brutal that the younger generation of fighters who join the LTTE display a unique determination to fight against the oppressive apparatus - the Sinhala armed forces. Having provided intense training in conventional combat Mr. Pirabakaran offered the fighting units of the Eastern Province an opportunity to deal a heavy blow to the enemy forces, which they promptly took.

Bala Falls Seriously III

Bala looked fresh and neat in his white verti and bone shirt when he appeared, ready to leave for the wedding of a female cadre on the evening of 27th August 1998. But, as I looked at

him there was something not quite right. Distorting his otherwise normal appearance were his swollen eyes. I had noticed Bala's eyes were puffy at the same time on the previous evening but dismissed my concern by attributing it to a longer than usual afternoon nap. But it was impossible for me to hold onto that view on this successive day. I made light of this puffiness in Bala's face when I pointed out the problem to the LTTE doctor, Suri at the wedding. Suri was slightly taken aback and reflective when I jokingly suggested that the abdominal discomfort he had been experiencing for a few weeks without any apparent cause and the puffiness around his eyes and oedema of his limbs must have its aetiology in renal disease. When his urine output was almost nil the next morning, I knew Bala was seriously ill. And with this, a new turn of events unfolded in our personal history. Since that day we have been living under a cloud of uncertainty as Bala's failing health took him to the brink of death during the early stages of his illness in the Vanni.

A team of LTTE doctors rushed to examine Bala the following day on hearing of his signs and symptoms. In the absence of any diagnostic equipment, a provisional diagnosis of kidney infection based on clinical observation was agreed upon after confabulations between the LTTE doctors and the medical staff at the local hospital. The doctors had determined the diagnosis from the high level of protein in his urine measured by the outdated method of slowly heating urine in a test tube over a bunsen burner flame and estimating the amount of protein by the level of cloudiness that appeared. The treatment of choice was oral antibiotic therapy, but when the response to successive families of antibiotics failed to deliver the expected response and his condition progressively deteriorated, alarm bells were sounded.

Dr Suri, a senior LTTE doctor, was given the responsibility for the medical management of Bala's illness. Suri, an extremely competent and caring young doctor, had gained most of his medical experience in the surgical department of the Jaffna General Hospital before the exodus to the Vanni in 1996, and in the treatment of the injured LTTE cadres afterwards. He was concerned that his medical knowledge was insufficient to cope with Bala's treatment. In this situation Suri, a young man with an enormous sense of responsibility and duty to his patients, refused to be hustled into decisions against his own judgement. He drew on the advice and medical experience of his colleague Dr. Pathmalojini - my friend from the Jaffna days - and referred to the library of medical books available to him. Suri realised the urgency of more thorough investigations to substantiate a diagnosis if Bala was to have any hope of effective treatment. From the outset, Suri opted for a conservative approach to Bala's management. He was acutely aware that without thorough tests and examination it would be impossible to establish a comprehensive diagnosis. In such circumstances, in his medical opinion, blindly prescribing treatment could be more damaging in the long term. So while Suri treated Bala within the perimeters of his knowledge and facilities, he cleverly sought out ways to establish a more scientific diagnosis based on biochemical analysis from which he could proceed with treatment and management. With the help of a colleague, Suri discovered a way of sending blood and urine samples to Colombo for analysis, without revealing the name of the patient whose specimens were to be examined. So blood and urine samples were labelled with false names and despatched to Colombo for analysis.

When Suri approached our house late in the evening in the company of another doctor a week or so after sending the first sample of blood, I immediately knew bad news was on the way. We had learned by Suri's methods that he preferred the support of a colleague when he was the bearer of news that he had difficulty in divulging. The tests confirmed that Bala did indeed have severely impaired renal function (diabetic nephropathy) secondary to prolonged diabetes. But none of us had anyway of knowing that Bala's condition was complicated by total obstruction of his left kidney. The diagnosis Suri brought with him was one matter; the more immediate concern for us all was the deteriorating potassium and urea levels to which, in the Vanni, absolutely no treatment was available. Bala's condition was visibly deteriorating. Mr. Pirabakaran, a regular visitor after hearing of Bala's illness, was informed of the diagnosis.

The Sri Lankan government's decade and a half-long blockade of food and medicine to the North had wreaked havoc on the health care facilities and undermined the health of the population. Severe shortages of such basic medicines as paracetamol was a perennial problem which had inflicted wide spread suffering on the people and caused unnecessary death in many instances. Compounding the danger to the wellbeing of patients was the absence of diagnostic equipment at the hospitals. There were no X-ray facilities at the Puthukuddiruppu hospital. The machine had long ago ceased functioning, compelling patients to travel very long distances to the other side of Vanni for a simple X-ray. More often than not when they arrived at the hospital, the machine would be out of order or films were not available since the Sri Lankan Defence Ministry had rejected the requisition application, depriving the hospital of this basic requirement. Laboratory equipment for biochemical analysis of specimens from patients to assist in the accurate diagnosis of diseases was not available. This is the context in which Bala fell ill.

In an environment badly equipped to cope with renal failure, Bala's prognosis looked extremely poor. Since it was impossible for him to travel to Colombo for treatment as many of the other patient's did the only course of management for the doctors was relief of his symptoms with the limited facilities and medicines available to them, and monitoring of his illness. On several occasions the Sri Lankan army closed down checkpoints preventing the flow of traffic to Colombo. This had a devastating emotional effect on me for it meant delays in sending blood specimens to Colombo for analysis to gain an assessment of his condition. Reports were often delayed, taking up to ten days to reach us by which time his condition had undergone further change. It was a frustrating experience for Dr. Suri to have his hands tied by lack of resources in the management of his patient and to watch him deteriorating, knowing there was nothing he could do to either relieve or help him. The constant excruciating headaches from his dangerously high blood pressure was temporarily relieved by increasing the old generation of hypotensive drugs. His ectopic heartbeats were, for a long period, the only indication that his potassium must be at the life threatening level. Nothing could be done for his loss of appetite, photo- phobia and his increasing irritability. Complicating the whole medical picture was a sudden unavailability of insulin for management of his diabetes. The brand of insulin used by Bala was available in small amounts in Colombo and in India and foreign countries. Throughout our time in India and Jaffna, Mr. Pirabakaran had made it a point to ensure that Bala had a fresh supply of medicine available to him. Now, added to the crisis we were in, I

learned that the stores of insulin I thought I kept safely for use were either out of date or had deteriorated from improper storage. Faced with the fact that it was impossible to obtain any fresh supplies of insulin in the immediate future, I gambled on using out of date stock. I had no choice. When the doses from one bottle appeared to be ineffective, I swapped to another vial as I waited and hoped that by some miracle one of the many people despatched to purchase his medicine would somehow or other find a supplier. Two weeks later Mr. Pirabakaran came to our house carrying a more than ample amount of fresh insulin stored in ice packs.

Bala's condition steadily deteriorated with him unable to get up off the bed and confined to dark rooms away from the sunlight, and it appeared that he would rapidly progress to a stage requiring emergency renal replacement treatment in the near future. In such an eventuality, the doctors were acutely aware, there was nothing they could offer Bala in terms of treatment with the facilities that were available in the Vanni. During these emotionally tense times for me I often observed a senior cadre, Kapil Amman, sitting quietly in Bala's office reading the paper and waiting. Our relationship to Kapil Amman extends as far back as 1984 when he was one of the first cadres to attend political classes by Bala. A young man from Trincomalee, Kapil Amman has had wide experience in the battlefield. He is truly a gentle soul and he reflected deeply on such issues as human rights, which he often discussed with Bala. Kapil Amman never disturbed either Bala or me, except to enquire frequently about the progress of his condition. But his quiet presence always told me he was available for any help I might require.

The news that Bala was gravely ill and might not recover spread throughout the movement like wildfire. Mr. Pirabakaran had obviously informed his commanders of Bala's deteriorating condition and one by one they appeared at the door anxious to see him, perhaps for the last time. Amongst the commanders who came was Pottu Amman, whom we had not seen for many months. Our old friend, Baby Subramaniam, was disturbed by the news and, along with his wife travelled for a day from their home in Malaavi to visit Bala. Indeed, during this crisis in our lives support flowed in from all sources and directions.

One of the earliest visitors to rush to our house to offer me help was Rani, wife of Balakumar, the former EROS leader. A trained nurse, Rani understood the danger that Bala was in more than most people did and this knowledge is perhaps the reason tears flowed when she visited. Nevertheless, her obvious sadness at Bala's failing health did not prevent her from administering physical help in whatever way she could, and she put a great deal of effort into preparing dishes to wet his flagging appetite, while taking into consideration his blood chemistry also. It was often helpful to talk to Rani on a professional basis as I had forgotten many aspects of nursing care and she was able to refresh my memory and offer hints that eased Bala's discomfort.

Vaneetha my old friend was there to help in whatever way she could. The doctors had ordered a strict diet for Bala during his illness, which severely constrained the type of food I could cook for him. At the same time it was necessary to maintain his nutritional state. I called on Vaneetha for new ideas and different dishes and she willingly spent her time to teach me. Indeed, it was quite an irony to have a Sinhalese lady teaching a western woman how to cook Tamil

food and the situation often bought a chuckle between us. Most people laughed when they saw the two of us together, using Tamil as the medium of communication. Vaneetha often visited our house alone, but on several occasions she visited with her husband, Mr. Nadesan who was in charge of the LTTE's police force. We were family friends. Nadesan frequently consulted Bala on matters related to the police force and he was always willing to listen to his perspective. Bala gave many lectures to the newly recruited police force repeatedly emphasising the humanistic approach stressing the impact of the abnormal social conditions caused by the war and the need for the police to view with sympathy and understanding the magnitude of the problems the people faced. Indeed, on many occasions, Bala became the conscience of the people in conveying to Nadesan the complaints made by the public to him concerning the tough action taken by the police force. Being a senior cadre with a progressive political orientation, Nadesan valued our ideas and took our criticisms positively. Puthavai's wife Ranjini, was also helpful in preparing dishes that Bala enjoyed and kindled his appetite. Soosai's wife, seeing the strain I was under, came with her children and cooked food that Bala particularly liked.

In the meantime, Dr. Suri relayed daily reports to Mr Pirabakaran on Bala's deteriorating condition. Mr. Pirabakaran sought and received the collective medical opinion of several doctors in the Vanni. In their medical opinion, Bala's best chance of survival and his long term prognosis hinged on him being evacuated out of the country as soon as possible to a place where medical facilities for the management of renal failure were available. We immediately considered Tamil Nadu as a preferred option for emergency medical treatment. Though some Tamil political leaders - our friends and sympathisers were willing to help we could not take the risk because of the proscription of the LTTE in India. We pinned our hopes on a request to a foreign country after Mr. Pirabakaran instructed our international secretariat to contact the Norwegian government.

Chandrika's Demands

The Norwegian Ambassador in Colombo, Mr. Jon Westborg was thoroughly briefed by the former Foreign Minister Mr. Hameed, on the significance of Bala to any future negotiating process between the LTTE and the Sri Lanka government. Westborg was given the green light by his government to investigate the authenticity of the information concerning Bala's condition and the ICRC was called in to assist in this process. About five weeks after the onset of Bala's illness, an ICRC team headed by Mr. Max Hadorn, then the chief of the delegation in Colombo, accompanied by a doctor, arrived in the Vanni with a request to visit Bala and to carry out a medical examination. The delegation visited our house in Puthukuddiruppu and the response of the doctor to the delegate leader following the examination of Bala was, in his words, 'He must be removed as early as possible'. After collecting blood and urine specimens for further analysis to validate the full extent of his illness, the ICRC delegation returned to Colombo with a promise of follow up.

The Norwegian Government, with the moral support of the ICRC, approached Chandrika Kumaratunga to seek a safe evacuation of Bala out of Sri Lanka on humanitarian grounds. Chandrika was told that Bala was critically ill with renal insufficiency and that he needed emergency treatment abroad and the Norwegian Government was willing to help. The Norwegians had also impressed upon Kumaratunga the significance of saving Bala's life for a possible future peace process between the LTTE and the Sri Lanka Government. There were extensive deliberations in Colombo and Mr. Kadirgamar was also consulted. The Norwegians had informed us through our representative in Oslo that the Government of Sri Lanka was favourably considering Bala's case and even discussing logistics for the evacuation of Bala. Mr. Pirabakaran looked relieved and pleased when he brought this news. On that particular day, as a measure of goodwill and as a significant humanitarian gesture, Mr. Pirabakaran released nine soldiers (prisoners of war) and crewmen in the custody of the LTTE. Now we were waiting for a positive response from the Kumaratunga Government. Several anxious days passed. There was no response and Bala's condition was deteriorating. In desperation we contacted the ICRC. To our dismay, the ICRC delegate told us that their organisation was kept out of the Colombo discussions on Bala's case since Mr. Kadirgamar did not trust them. After two months of waiting in anxious expectation, we finally received a message from the Norwegian Government. Chandrika and Kadirgamar had worked out a list of demands (or guarantees) for the LTTE to fulfil as 'significant reciprocal humanitarian gestures' if Bala had to be evacuated with the assistance of Sri Lanka.

Firstly, the Tiger leadership should guarantee that the LTTE should not disrupt or impede the Government administration in the Northeastern Province nor should they attack and destroy any Government property in Tamil areas. Secondly, the LTTE should not threaten or attack any sea or air transport (supplies) to the Northeast. Thirdly, the LTTE should not attack any public property throughout the country. Fourthly, the LTTE should release all persons in LTTE's custody, not merely those known to the ICRC, but others also. In this context, the Government claimed - without any concrete proof that the LTTE was holding at least two hundred and fifty persons without the knowledge of the ICRC. Fifthly, the LTTE should release all cadres under the age of eighteen in its forces to the next of kin.

From this list of demands or rather 'guarantees' we knew that Chandrika was demanding her pound of flesh exploiting the vulnerable situation of the LTTE. These demands which were of a military nature affecting the very mode of armed struggle - had no relevance whatsoever to a humanitarian request seeking only safe passage for the evacuation of a person suffering from a critical renal illness. This attitude betrayed the callous and calculative nature of Chandrika Kumaratunga. Bala and I rejected these conditions outright. Bala said he preferred to die with honour and self-respect rather than acceding to these humiliating demands. Mr. Prabakaran was furious with Chandrika and Kadirgamar for stipulating such unacceptable conditions. The President's position on this matter had a profoundly negative impact on the thinking of the LTTE leadership. If she could not favourably consider a simple humanitarian plea compassionately for the future prospect of peace, how would she be able to resolve the most difficult and complex of all the issues the, Tamil ethnic conflict? This was the feeling that prevailed amongst the LTTE leaders at that time.

Miraculously, as weeks passed by, new blood results revealed that Bala had survived the acute crisis he had been in and had settled into chronic renal insufficiency. Nevertheless, the urgency of Bala leaving the Vanni for medical care did not decline. The doctors were constantly concerned that the environment posed a serious threat to his health and they were uncertain of the length of time before Bala would require renal replacement therapy. For me, every day management of his wellbeing became a nightmare. His strict diet precluded so many foods and his weight dropped dramatically. I was constantly aware of the coming monsoon season and that the seas would then be impassable, condemning us to another four months wait in the Vanni until the weather changed. I was desperate that he should leave the Vanni while he was well enough to make the journey and before the monsoon set in. The anxiety within me surfaced when Mr. Pirabakaran and Mathy made a visit to our house. I explained to the couple about Bala's precarious health condition emphasising the urgency of evacuating him abroad for treatment. If this was not done immediately, Bala's death was inevitable, I told them, while struggling to contain my emotions. Apparently moved by my distress, Mr. Pirabakaran understood the critical situation. He too loved and respected Bala and was deeply concerned about his wellbeing. He consoled me by assuring that he would do everything within his power and resources to send 'Bala Anna' abroad for treatment. Mr. Pirabakaran acted immediately. He alerted his international network to arrange a ship to evacuate Bala. Within weeks we received news that our ship was moored in the deep sea, waiting for us.

With news of our imminent departure, leaders and cadres of the LTTE flocked to our house for a final farewell. My stomach grew tighter and my appetite declined in the days approaching our departure on 23rd January 1999. Of course it was imperative for Bala to be taken out of the Vanni, but I had no appetite to leave the people and the struggle behind. When Tamilenthirai came to our house on the afternoon of our departure day I knew that our time to leave was near. When Tamil Chelvan arrived in his Pajero to escort us to the beach, the time was nearer. When Soosai swung into our driveway in the vehicle to take us to his camp on the Mullaitivu coast I knew we would be on our way soon. We had only to wait for Mr. Pirabakaran's arrival. When he finally came, he briefly spoke to Bala and me bidding us goodbye. Jokes and smiles hid each other's sadness. Bala, restraining his emotions, ignored Jimmy, his faithful old dog of fifteen years, who looked up at him expectantly, got into the Pajero and stared ahead. Unable to resist Jimmy's beckoning to us, I patted her on the head then looked around at everyone, and finally to Mr. Pirabakaran for the last time. Our vehicle sped away from the house. It was all over.

Post Script

It was the first week of February 1999. The location: a bustling and enterprising capital city of a South East Asian nation. As we walked into the reception hall of the modern, clean hospital to which Bala was to be admitted for emergency medical examination, a sense of relief that I was no longer alone in my efforts to keep him alive swept over me. Doctors with the knowledge and a hospital with facilities to manage his illness were readily available to deal with medical problems that might arise. Within thirty six hours of his admission all the results of the main medical tests were available and the caring and reassuring consultant finally clarified the medical picture concerning Bala's ill health and gave us some insight into what lay ahead for us. He confirmed that the medical reports were consistent with diabetic nephropathy and that it was a progressive disease: he was reluctant to commit himself to our queries regarding the duration before he would require renal replacement therapy. But more urgent and a cause for concern for the medical staff was the grossly enlarged left kidney that was revealed on ultra-sound examination. The kidney was totally obstructed and non functioning; the doctors were unable to identify the cause of the obstruction but they were conclusive that it would have to be removed as soon as possible.

The renal surgeon at the side of Bala's post-operative bed in the intensive care unit picked up the specimen bag. He showed me the huge sick kidney he had taken four hours to remove from Bala and pointed out that had there been any further delay in operating, the kidney would have ruptured, causing a medical crisis. Nevertheless, under the caring and professional management of the doctors and nurses, Bala made a remarkable recovery following his left nephrectomy and he was discharged with advice concerning management of his nephropathy. One hurdle was over. It was now imperative to find away out of the country before we were arrested as illegal immigrants and while Bala was well enough to travel before he progressed to the stage of requiring renal replacement therapy.

We continued to live an underground life in the capital, trying to avoid drawing attention to ourselves, while we pondered a safe way out of the country to return to London. Since we had entered the country without valid documents and out of date passports it was impossible for us to run the risk of passing through airport terminals. We had no intention of acting foolishly and jeopardising our safety and freedom at this stage. Our first task in the process of leaving the country was to reverse our illegal status by securing at least a valid passport. We established contact with our old friends in London, which led eventually to an agreement by the British Foreign Office for arrangements to be made for Bala to collect his new passport at a British Embassy outside England. The Australian Embassy in London was co-operative in allowing my appointed representative to collect my new passport for me. Friends in the

country we were trapped in willingly endorsed our travel documents, allowing us to pass safely through immigration on our way out of the country.

Our return to London, in my view, heralded the beginning of another challenging chapter in my life. Bala's medical needs would require fundamental adjustments to our lifestyle and priorities. The nephrologists in a London hospital fobbed off any suggestion of renal transplant for Bala, ruling out the prospect of him regaining his lost quality of life since he became unwell. It was during these uncertain days the Norwegians entered into our lives as brokers of peace. Mr. Erik Solheim, Mr. Wegger Strommen, the former State Secretary in the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, Mr. Jon Westborg, Norwegian Ambassador in Colombo, and Ms. Kjersti Tromsdal, Executive Officer, met us at our residence in South West London to explore the feasibility of peace talks between the LTTE and the Sri Lanka Government. After having consulted the leadership in Vanni, the LTTE agreed to the Norwegian facilitation.

In view of Bala's steadily deteriorating renal condition, the Norwegian Government offered medical assistance on humanitarian grounds. In Norwegian medical opinion, renal transplantation was a viable option for Bala and one worth exploring. Subsequently, Bala was flown to the Norwegian capital Oslo, and admitted to the main general hospital where he was subjected to thorough medical tests to ascertain whether or not his physical condition was conducive to successful renal transplantation. He received a positive response to his suitability for transplant and we decided to proceed. In the early part of 2000 Bala underwent renal transplant surgery and made an uncomplicated and steady recovery. He was discharged from hospital almost a new man. While Bala was staying in a hotel in Oslo recuperating from his transplant operation, Chandrika Kumaratunga, in an interview given to the Far Eastern Economic Review, incredulously claimed that it was she who granted permission to the Norwegian Government for Bala's treatment. This was a blatantly false and irresponsible statement. We contacted the Norwegian Foreign Ministry and registered our protest. The Norwegian government was also annoyed: they had not sought permission from Kumaratunga for Bala's treatment. The Norwegian Government made the decision purely on humanitarian grounds. Of course Chandrika was informed about Bala's successful transplantation surgery later, through the Norwegian Ambassador in Colombo. We requested the Norwegian authorities to clarify the matter. Accordingly a senior Norwegian Foreign Ministry official issued a statement rebutting Chandrika's claim. Bala also gave a lengthy interview to the Tamil Guardian (25th March 2000) explaining how Chandrika and Kadirgamar imposed impossible conditions on the LTTE and refused to help Norway and the ICRC who sought a safe passage for Bala out of the island. Following the renal transplant Bala was able to resume his political work and we have subsequently continued our involvement in the struggle at the diplomatic level in London.

Annexure

Text of Letters Exchanged Between Lankan President Mr. Premadasa and the Indian Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi

Letter dated 2nd June 1989 Written by President Premadasa to the Indian Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi

My dear Prime Minister,

I am writing to you on some matters of urgent importance. The most important matter relates to the presence of Indian forces in Sri Lanka. After I assumed the Presidency of Sri Lanka, the Government of India initiated the withdrawal of troops. We are grateful for your prompt action in this regard.

One of the important campaign pledges made by me at both the Presidential and Parliamentary elections was the withdrawal of the IPKF on being elected to office. I assumed the office of President of Sri Lanka on the 2nd of January, 1989. Five months have elapsed since then. The complete withdrawal of the IPKF will hopefully contribute to stabilising the situation in Sri Lanka, where the presence of the IPKF has become a deeply divisive and resentful issue. It is also in keeping with your often expressed sentiments that the IPKF will be withdrawn when requested by the President of Sri Lanka. I am thankful for the efforts of the IPKF during the time it has been in our country. I have often paid tribute to the bravery of the many officers and men who lost life and limb in the discharge of their duties. The tragedy of violence has not only affected your soldiers, it has also destroyed many Sri Lankans as well as our Armed Forces and large numbers of civilians, innocent and uninvolved, have suffered beyond description. Their sacrifices must not be in vain. I am confident that a complete withdrawal of the IPKF will enable me to secure the trust and confidence of my people. Therefore, I would like all IPKF personnel to be withdrawn by July 31st, 1989.

The withdrawal of the IPKF will also enable Sri Lanka to host the SAARC Summit in November this year in a climate of tranquillity. As you are aware, we could not undertake our obligation to do this in 1988. You will appreciate how difficult it is to a regional gathering of this nature with foreign forces on our soil. Our people are most enthusiastic about welcoming leaders of our own region, particularly our closest neighbours. However, their anxieties must also be satisfied especially in relation to their deep patriotic and nationalist sensitivities.

In this context, we have submitted several proposals regarding an Indo-Sri Lanka Friendship Treaty. I believe that, in the long term, such an agreement will further strengthen relations between India and Sri Lanka. I await your response to our proposals in this regard.

We have always appreciated your sincere interest in the unity and the territorial integrity of our country. Our own efforts to this end need the understanding and goodwill of our neighbours. I believe, that your people and you yourself share these objectives and will contribute to their realisation.

I have just seen the Aide Memoire which was handed over by your High Commissioner this evening. As the Aide Memoire refers to the need for consultations between the Governments, I am designating my Foreign Secretary to personally clarify our position on these matters. With the assurance of my highest consideration and esteem.

Letter dated 20th June 1989 Written by Mr. Rajiv Gandhi to Mr. Premadasa

Dear Mr. President,

I have your letter of the 2nd June, which was handed over to me by your Special Envoy, Foreign Secretary Tilakaratne.

India is committed to preserving the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka, under the terms of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement. It was a result of this commitment and our responsibility as a guarantor for the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement that we responded to the request of the Government of Sri Lanka, to send the IPKF. This was at a time when the situation seemed headed inexorably towards the break-up of Sri Lanka. During its presence, the IPKF has striven with considerable success but at heavy cost to itself, to prevent such an outcome and safeguard the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka. Three successive elections have been held peacefully despite threats of terrorist violence in the North-East and all Tamil groups barring one, had given up the demand for Eelarn. If the process of devolution of powers to the Provincial Council had been implemented in time and had the deliberate attempt by the Sri Lankan Government to alter the population balance in the Tamil areas by the continued state sponsored colonisation of Tamil areas been stopped, the extremists would have been further isolated and marginalised, and the violence ended.

You have yourself stated that we had started the withdrawal of the IPKF even before you requested for it. A broad time-frame for the IPKF withdrawal was also discussed at our initiative, based on which your Foreign Minister had made a statement in your Parliament on the 31st March, 1989. All this was being done on the basis of assurances given by the Sri Lankan Government and on assumption that the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement-especially the devolution of powers to the Provincial Councils-would proceed simultaneously, so that the legitimate aspirations of the Tamils could be met within the framework

of the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka. It is pertinent to recall that it was precisely because these aspirations were not being met that a situation was created which threatened the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka.

I have always maintained that the IPKF will not stay in Sri Lanka a day longer than necessary. But we cannot be unmindful of the responsibilities and obligations of the two countries under the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement and to join the democratic process within the framework of a united Sri Lanka only on the basis of assurances that the Tamil majority in North-Eastern Province will be given substantial devolution of powers. Our two Governments are therefore morally and legally bound to ensure that the Tamils are given the autonomy they were promised, both in the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, as also in the additional areas promised in the Agreement signed between the former President Jayewardene and myself on the 7th November, 1987. Failure to do so will only lend credence to the claims made by Tamil groups that Tamils cannot expect justice within a united Sri Lanka. We have to be fully conscious of the dangers of a return to a situation which may be worse than prevailing prior to the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement. We believe that, in the spirit of traditional friendship between our two countries, we must jointly draw up a mutually agreed schedule for the full implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement and the complete withdrawal of the IPKF. The two have to be joint, parallel exercises.

We have no objection to your proposal for a friendship treaty. I had told your Special Envoy that we could set dates for commencing discussions with a view of finalising the text of the proposed treaty.

Letter dated 29th June 1989 Written by Mr. Premadasa to Mr. Rajiv Gandhi.

Excellency,

I am glad to inform you that the LTTE has announced a complete cessation of hostilities against the Sri Lanka Government with immediate effect.

The LTTE which is no longer a proscribed group has in the course of recent discussions with the Government of Sri Lanka agreed to settle whatever problems they have through the process of negotiation. Under the circumstances it will be appreciated if Your Excellency will ensure that the IPKF does not take any offensive action against the LTTE which will tend to prejudice the negotiations that are currently in progress. Accept Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Letter dated 30th June 1989 Written by Mr. Premadasa to Mr. Rajiv Gandhi in response to Mr. Gandhi's letter of 20th June 1989.

Dear Prime Minister,

I am in receipt of your letter of 20th June in reply to my letter of 2nd June, 1989. I thank you for reiterating India's commitment to preserve the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka as was stated in the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement.

We appreciate the assurance given by the Indian Government in providing the personnel to assist in the acceptance of arms surrendered by the militants as envisaged by Article 2.9 of the Agreement. We are also thankful for the assistance provided at our request, in terms of Article 2.16 (c) of the Agreement and paragraph 6 of the Annexure in affording military assistance to ensure the cessation of hostilities.

I am unable however to accept the contention that the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement, including the devolution of powers to the Provincial Councils, is in any way linked with the withdrawal of the Indian Armed Forces. They had been invited to Sri Lanka for the specific purpose of guaranteeing and enforcing the cessation of hostilities. The Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement does not provide for continued military activities by the Indian armed forces in Sri Lanka after a request has been made by me to have them withdrawn. Continuation of such military activities would also be a violation of peremptory norms of international law.

The Indian Peace Keeping Force came to Sri Lanka at the request of the President of Sri Lanka. Due to the circumstances that arose thereafter the IPKF was requested by the President to afford military assistance to ensure the cessation of hostilities. The only condition that should be satisfied for the withdrawal of the Indian armed forces is a decision by the President of Sri Lanka that they should be withdrawn. The request made by me to withdraw the Indian armed forces has satisfied this condition. It is therefore incumbent on the Government of India to withdraw the Indian armed forces from Sri Lanka. The proposals for the political settlement of the ethnic problem negotiated from 4.5.1986 to 19.12.1986 as well as the residual matters to be finalised between the government of Sri Lanka, and the government of India have all been accepted and incorporated in the relevant amendments to our Constitution and the Provincial Councils Act. The delay in giving effect to certain proposals within the time-frame envisaged by the agreement had been occasioned by the inability of the Indian armed forces to ensure cessation of hostilities and violence in the North and the East.

The actual functioning of the Provincial Councils in the new system of administration is applicable not only to the North and the East but to all the Provinces of Sri Lanka. This is entirely a political process in which the military has no role whatsoever. You will no doubt agree that it has been an experience common in many other jurisdictions that the establishment of an entirely new structure of administration based on devolution, is essentially a long-term process. There is neither a legal nor any other rational basis for the presence of any military

force to ensure that the administrative structure is fully in place in any Province of Sri Lanka. I have, in consultation with the Ministers of the Cabinet and the Chief Ministers of the Provincial Councils, taken all steps to ensure that the administrative structure necessary for the effective exercise of devolved powers is in place as expeditiously as possible.

As I have already intimated to you in my letter of 2 June, 1989 one of the important pledges made by me both at the Presidential and at the Parliamentary elections was to ensure the withdrawal of the Indian forces. To quote the manifesto:

“We will seek a Friendship Treaty with India on the lines of the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty. If by the time our candidate is elected President, the Indian forces have not left, we will ensure that they are withdrawn.”

The main Opposition Party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, in their election manifesto had stated that the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement would be abrogated and the Indian forces asked to leave. Thus, it will be seen that over 95 per cent of the voters clearly mandated the withdrawal of the Indian forces. The majority approved the UNP proposals for the conclusion of a Friendship Treaty with India.

I would like to mention a most significant development, which may not have been brought to your notice, namely that the majority of people of all three communities in North and the East demand the immediate withdrawal of the Indian forces.

In your letter you have mentioned that there has been a deliberate attempt by the Government of Sri Lanka to alter the population balance in the Tamil areas by continuing state-sponsored colonisation. I must emphatically refute this. There has been no colonisation whatsoever in these areas since the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement.

The ground is now set for the Government to resolve any outstanding issues relating to the ethnic problem on the basis of consultation, compromise and consensus with all communities and groups concerned. As I have already informed you, the LTTE has announced the cessation of hostilities against the Government of Sri Lanka. They have also resolved to settle any issues outstanding through negotiations and discussions. It is in this context that I have requested you to issue the necessary instructions to the Indian armed forces to refrain from any offensive operations against the LTTE. The LTTE has already expressed its willingness to put an end to such activities against the Indian armed forces on a reciprocal basis. The withdrawal of the Indian armed forces within the time-frame visualised by me is an essential pre-condition for the Government to proceed with the consolidation of a political settlement.

Far from being of any assistance in the complete resolution of the ethnic problem, the presence of the Indian forces are now a serious impediment. In this connection, I must bring to your notice an alarming development that has been taking place in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. There are complaints that youths mostly of tender age are being forcibly conscripted by certain political groups and are being trained at the hands of the Indian forces. I need not elaborate on the possible consequences that will follow if this is not checked forthwith.

Therefore, in consideration of all these circumstances, I again earnestly request the immediate recommencement of the withdrawal of the Indian armed forces and an acceleration of this process.

I am glad at your favourable response to my proposal for a Friendship Treaty with India. We have already given our draft to the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi. I would request that discussion should commence without delay, so that this Treaty could give concrete and expeditious expression to the traditional bonds of friendship between our two countries.

Letter dated 30th June 1989 Written by Mr. Rajiv Gandhi to Mr. Premadasa in response to Mr. Premadasa's letter of 29th June 1989.

Dear Mr. President,

I have your message of 29th June sent through your High Commissioner.

The Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement provides for a cessation of hostilities between the Tamil militant groups and the Sri Lankan forces, and also for the Sri Lankan Forces to stay in barracks in the North-East Province. Both these were achieved on 30th July, 1987. Thus, there has already been an effective cessation of hostilities between the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE. I am glad that the LTTE has now formally conceded this reality.

We hope that the formal agreement of the LTTE to cease hostilities clearly implies their commitment to the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka and to renounce violence and to respect democratic processes. We trust that, consequent to giving up violence, LTTE will resume surrender of arms through the Sri Lankan Government—a process which had started on the 5th August, 1987 and is not yet complete. Unless the LTTE have undertaken to hand over their arms and to renounce violence not only towards the Sri Lankan Government but towards the other citizens of the North-Eastern Province, their announcement of cessation of hostilities would be meaningless.

Since IPKF has a mandate in terms of India's role as a guarantor, for ensuring the physical safety and security of all communities of the North-Eastern Province, I would appreciate clarifications on the points I have mentioned above. These clarifications will facilitate an immediate decision on the IPKF's cessation of offensive action to disarm the LTTE. The earlier we receive your response, the quicker will be the process of initiating suitable action.

Letter dated 4th July 1989 Written by Mr. Premadasa to Mr. Rajiv Gandhi

Dear Prime Minister,

I have your message of 30th June sent through your High Commissioner, in response to my message requesting you to ensure that the Indian armed forces in Sri Lanka do not take any offensive action against the LTTE. Such action or any intensification of operations is liable to prejudice the negotiations currently in progress and prolong the armed conflict.

Your statement that the cessation of hostilities took place on 30th July, 1987 does not accord with facts. The LTTE ceased hostilities against the Sri Lankan security forces only for a few days but resumed violence on 2nd August, 1987 and continued until they announced a cessation of hostilities in June, 1989. During the interim 148 service and police personnel were killed and 80 were wounded: 481 civilians were killed and 115 injured.

The LTTE announced a cessation of hostilities only in June this year after the commencement of the dialogue with the Government. This cessation covers not only the Government but also the people in the North and the East and in fact the people in the whole of Sri Lanka. At the same time, the LTTE reiterated its commitment to resolve all outstanding problems through negotiations and discussion and indicated their readiness to enter the democratic process.

As stated in your message, you have been seeking to disarm the LTTE for the past two years and this process is not yet complete, nor have you been able to bring them to the negotiating table. I am confident that I will be able to ensure that the LTTE will give up their arms after the Indian armed forces have been withdrawn.

The political solution which I seek to provide will not only be within the framework of our Constitution but must also preserve the sovereignty of our people, the unitary character and the territorial integrity of our country.

The responsibility of providing safety and security for all citizens within Sri Lanka is solely the responsibility of the Government of Sri Lanka. The Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement does not and indeed cannot in international law provide a mandate for the Government of India or its armed forces to assume any responsibility for this function otherwise than at the express request of the Sri Lankan Government. In any event, during the past two years when the Indian armed forces were operating in the Northern and Eastern Provinces they were unable to prevent the killings of a number of civilians and the displacement of even a larger number from their homes besides the casualties referred to above.

Any interpretation of the agreement which seeks to provide a mandatory role for the Government of India or its armed forces within Sri Lanka otherwise than the express request of the Government of Sri Lanka would constitute a serious interference in the internal affairs of a friendly sovereign country and a gross violation of the peremptory norms of International Law. I am sure such is not your intention.

I trust these clarifications will enable you to ensure that the Indian armed forces do not continue any offensive operations against the LTTE.

Letter dated 11th July 1989 Written by Mr. Rajiv Gandhi to Mr. Premadasa

Dear Mr. President,

I have your letter of 30th June and 5th July. I do not want to enter into a debate on various interpretations of mutual obligations assumed by our sovereign nations. These are quite clear. I also do not wish to go into the validity of assertions like the LTTE having resumed violence on 2nd August, 1987 whereas the arms surrender started and the amnesty letter was handed over by the Sri Lankan Government to the LTTE three days later. We should let facts speak for themselves.

There is an agreement between the two countries. The Agreement is meant to preserve the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka and to ensure the safety, security and legitimate interests of the Tamils. Nearly a thousand Indian soldiers have made the supreme sacrifice in fulfilment of India's obligations as a guarantor to this Agreement. Since the signing of the Agreement, not only have the Provincial Council elections been held, but also the Parliamentary and Presidential elections. The situation in the North-Eastern Province is far more settled and peaceful than elsewhere in Sri Lanka. Despite all this, the devolution package promised to the Tamils has not been implemented. These are incontrovertible facts.

Both of us agree that the IPKF should be withdrawn. Both of us agree that we had commenced the withdrawal even before you asked for it. A broad time-frame for IPKF withdrawal had in fact been discussed. Discussions on finalising details were proposed by your Foreign Minister at Harare only a few days prior to your unilateral announcement of 1st June. I have repeatedly said that the IPKF's withdrawal schedule should be worked out through joint consultations along with a simultaneous schedule for the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement. We are willing to resume discussions on this subject at any time and place of your convenience. Your colleague the Honourable Mr. Thondaman, who met me here, would have conveyed to you our desire for friendly relations and our willingness to resolve any misunderstanding through mutual consultations. If, however, discussions for this purpose are not acceptable to you, we will have to decide the details of IPKF's withdrawal unilaterally consistent with our responsibilities and obligations under the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement.

While I reiterate Government of India's willingness to cooperate with your government to resolve pending issues, I must emphasise to Your Excellency that India has traditionally been mindful of the sanctity of the agreements it signs with other countries and of commitments solemnly undertaken under such agreements. India will under no circumstances deviate from the policy of affecting our concerns.

It has been our practice to maintain the confidentiality of official correspondence particularly between Heads of State or Government, unless otherwise agreed upon. However, the gist of your messages to me was more often than not made available to the media before they reached me. Now I find that all our recent correspondence has been officially made public by the Sri Lankan Government. I may thus be constrained to depart from tradition by authorising this communication being made public, after you receive it.

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full name
CVF	Civilian Volunteer Force
ENLF	Eelam National Liberation Front
EPDP	Eelam People's Democratic Party
EPRLF	Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front
EROS	Eelam Revolutionary Organisation
IPKF	Indian Peace Keeping Force
JVP	'Janatha Vumukthi Perumuna' (People's Liberation Front)
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
PA	People's Alliance
PFLT	People's Front of Liberation Tigers
PLOTE	People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Co-Operation
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
TELO	Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation
TNA	Tamil National Army
TULF	Tamils United Liberation Front
UNP	United National Party

Back Cover

The author of this book, Adele Balasingham, is a sociologist, political activist and writer who has lived and worked in India and Sri Lanka for more than twenty years with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the freedom movement that spearheads the Tamil independence struggle. She has also published works on the dowry system amongst the Jaffna society and on the LTTE women fighters.



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