
JOURNEY TOWARDS BATTICALOA

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August was a violent month for Sri Lanka which experienced the worst fighting since the 2002 ceasefire between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels. Heavy fighting in Muthur District has created a humanitarian crisis. Over the last month thousands of civilians were displaced as they escape the latest round of fighting. People have been displaced a from Echilampattu, Muthur from the District of Trincomalee to Batticaloa District. Families are on the move daily often leaving everything behind to undertake dangerous journeys to places of safety. It is hard to get a sense of what is happening in the East sitting in 'strangely normal' Colombo so I decided to visit Batticaloa District in the last week of August.

The journey from Colombo to Batticaloa was in itself interesting. The trip was relatively normal up to Polannaruwa but as we stopped for lunch reminders of the conflict interrupted the languorous afternoon. In a restaurant at Kaduruwela a huge poster of Joe Abeywickrama dominates the wall. The actor was the main star in *Death on a Full Moon Day*, a film by Prasanna Vithanage. The film tells the story of a young Sri Lankan soldier who is killed in conflict with Tamil Tiger separatists. The plot revolves around a blind father, Wannihami (played by Joe Abeywickrama) who awaits news of his soldier son. One full moon *pooya* day, the state returns the casket of the dead son. The first romantic images in the film soon harden into a powerful lament. The serenity of the *stupa*, the *wewa* (tank) and a flowing river are displaced by the harsh reality of wasted youth. Asking the restaurant owner why the poster is on the wall he says he liked the way Wannihami in the film refused to accept the everyday realities of people in the North East of violence and loss.

These realities become clearer as we turn East from Habarana and the scenery changes from lush green to drier scrub. We say goodbye to the tourists enjoying an elephant safari and enter a world dominated by Army camps and remote military outposts. The comforts of Colombo become more and more distant as different smells and colours suffuse our vehicle. Posters advertising the bounty of Sri Lanka's natural beauty seem ironic as military convoys roar past. At an Army checkpoint in Manampitiya we are asked to show our

identification and the NGO workers in the van are asked for their registration certificates. We are relatively lucky. Our status as internationals spares us the intense checking that Tamil civilians face. At Welikanda I see bus travellers looking weary as they get down for yet another checking of their identity cards. There are between 5 to 10 ten checkpoints on the road to Batticaloa depending on the security situation where civilians are checked. Ordinary travellers must get out of vehicles and proceed to be frisked and checked often queueing in the sun as aluminium shelters are not yet erected. At Valaichenai burnt out houses stand as reminders of past abuses. The houses were torched in the early 90s, empty trophies of Army reprisals against civilians. It is civilians who are suffering again today, caught between warring factions who don't seem to care about the human cost of the current conflict.

As a result of the escalation of hostilities, over 200,000 people have been displaced from the North East since April 2006. In Batticaloa District alone OCHA estimates 37,738 people are now internally displaced (Figures estimates from OCHA, 22/08/06). As we drive past the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission at Valaichenai we see evidence of families fleeing shelling and airstrikes in Muthur. Makeshift tents outside the Church are now the new home for families displaced from Vakarai. In the East 'we are all victims' notes one resident. Years of conflict have resulted in continuous displacement, loss of property and fear of the warring factions. People in the East have felt the iron fist of intimidation by the LTTE in the form of tax extortion and the demand for young cadres. They have also felt the shadow of suspicion from the Sri Lankan Army which led to mass round ups in the early nineties. The war changed its character in the early 90s as both sides resorted to increasing brutality.

There was a time when Tamils may have had some sympathy for the LTTE as it stood up for their historic rights. Tamils wanted a share in politics in the South but discrimination through language acts, education quotas and harassment meant rebellion took a militant form. The trend of the LTTE towards turning civilians in the East into instruments for their cause means that their methods now vitiate the justice of

their cause. Today Batticaloa town is under the custody of the Armed Forces which means a predominantly Tamil population is controlled by a Sinhalese Army. This isn't a simple story of goodies and baddies or occupiers and resisters though. The East has been the backdrop for a number of struggles over the years. This makes the political situation in the East very complex and the climate of uncertainties makes attributing blame for the current unease problematic.

Complex Politics

Batticaloa district forms part of the former Eastern Province. It has a population of 545,477 split into Tamils (73%), Muslims (36%) and Burghers and Sinhalese 2%. The area is volatile as three factions; the LTTE; the Sri Lankan Army and the Karuna faction vie for power. Domination and intimidation are a fact of civilian life. Batticaloa town has been controlled by the Sri Lankan Army for several years. Due to the heavy fighting in Muthur the armed forces have been replaced by the STF, a paramilitary adjunct of the Police, who now patrol the town.

Ordinary residents talk of a rise in uncertainty. There are sporadic clashes between the Sri Lankan Army and the LTTE. Road blocks to make way for security convoys interrupt daily life. In addition people live under a shadow of fear. This is linked to a wave of abductions and killings in the last month. This human insecurity is nothing new. The city has witnessed countless murders, rapes, as well as mass disappearances of civilians in the early 90s. Despite documentation of complaints by the Batticaloa Peace Committee, there has been little investigation and no justice for affected families. A Government Commission of Inquiry into the Involuntary Removal and Disappearances of Civilians in the Eastern Province acknowledges that during the late 1980s and early 1990s a total of 1,100 Tamil civilians were disappeared and assumed killed by the Sri Lankan Army and Special Task Force personnel, with most atrocities taking place in 1990. No one has yet been indicted. Local residents note that the current climate of fear reminds them of earlier more horrifying periods when the smell of bodies being burnt to get rid of evidence hung thick in the air. Today residents live in a self-imposed curfew returning home by 6pm so that streets lie deserted at night except for military patrols and more eerie travellers which locals refer to as the 'men in white vans'.

Batticaloa is an important centre for Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, better known as Karuna Amman, the former

LTTE commander who challenged the Jaffna hegemony of the LTTE and broke away in 2004. He currently operates his own political & military group, the Tamileel Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal, or People's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (TMVP). A prominent TMVP sign welcoming people to Batticaloa stands opposite an Army checking point on the lagoon. It is important to note that the TMVP is not yet a political party and has a military wing operating with the support of the Sri Lankan Army to challenge the LTTE.

A local shopkeeper explains that people are used to the large military presence and checking in town on the bridges across the lagoon. Ordinary civilians have been subject to various regimes over the years: the struggle for LTTE hegemony in the 80s; the clampdown of the Indian Peacekeeping Forces (IPKF) in the late 80s which locals refer to as the 'Indian people killing force' and then gradual occupation by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces. Civilians in Batticaloa District are extremely vulnerable because of this backdrop of continuing power struggles and relative isolation from the rest of the island.

In the late 90s, civilian arrests and round ups were common. Today people talk of uncertainty as the old struggle between the LTTE and the Army has become more complex with the rise of the Karuna faction and the politicisation of Muslims. When Karuna broke away from the LTTE in April 2004 there was initially a feeling of relief in the East. 4-6,000 youths were released and the regime of tax extortion imposed by the LTTE (5-8% of government salaries) was lifted. Some of the ex-militants have positive stories but it seems many of them have been clawed back either by the LTTE in uncleared areas or into the Karuna military wing which operates under the protection of the Army. Human rights groups in the District blame both the LTTE and the Karuna group for child abductions. Young men are a particular target and families try to keep children indoors.

Rise in IDPs

Today an additional challenge is the large movement of people displaced from Muthur district because of heavy fighting. "contents" Sri Lankan air force planes resuming aerial bombardment of Muttur region in Trincomalee district on April 26th. The attacks followed the suicide bomber attack on Army Commander Lt. Gen Sarath Fonseka in Colombo on April 25th. Retired army brigadier Vipul Boteju, told AFP that President Mahinda Rajapakse had little choice but to order limited air strikes after the suicide

bombing at army headquarters in Colombo. "The government had to retaliate, they had to do something. They selected Trincomalee. They are showing we are not willing to simply accept what the Tigers have done to us," (D.B.S.Jeyaraj, 26 April 2006). As a result families fled their homes and sought refuge in religious places to try to escape shelling.

Stories of Displacement

In the wake of a humanitarian crisis with thousands of refugees on the move the government as well as International NGOs are keen for the recently displaced to stay with host families. In some ways reliance on local webs of support and networking is good but host families will also need support to cope with new financial burdens. Not all the displaced are lucky enough to have a host family. Some are still stranded on the road whilst others are in temporary 'sites'. I visited two sites for displaced families in Batticaloa town. The *Sinhala Maha Vidyalaya* School is home now for 177 families. These sites are supported by various International NGOs as the Government finds it hard to cope with the humanitarian crisis. Over 37,000 families have moved into the district due to recent fighting and this puts pressure on local services to cope with the demands of shelter, food and sanitation.

Talking to two women in the centre is heart rending. One 33 year old woman describes her journey of displacement. She said that the problems in Muttur started after the April 25th bomb blast. Everyday shelling and air strikes by the Army made people very frightened. Some families in the town began taking shelter at St. Anthony's Church. For 3 months her family went there everyday at 5pm hoping the Church would offer sanctuary from shelling. One day a small boy, a child of one of the women gathered round, was killed by a shell as he stood near the Church door. Escalating clashes between the LTTE and the Army was simply making it unsafe for civilians to stay. With the support of the ICRC a convoy of families began to move southwards. Despite the white flag of the ICRC convoy there were shell attacks and people dispersed, some moving into LTTE held 'uncleared' areas. Their journeys are ones of hardship. Most families travelled with just the clothes on their backs and perhaps a handbag. They have no idea if their homes are safe or destroyed. The long journey from Muthur to Vakaraï on foot took three days. They had little food and had to help the elderly on the way, sheltering in bunkers when air strikes began.

Many displaced families moved first to Verugal. As this area is under LTTE control and the Government was not letting

INGOs into uncleared areas families tried to move southwards to Government controlled areas. The two women I spoke with said it was Christian Priests whom they met in Verugal during Sunday mass who took pity on their plight and tried to organize transport for them to Batticaloa. The LTTE was not happy to let civilians move southwards as they act to some extent as a human shield but finally families managed to pay a bus driver to take them to Valaichenai. Life is tough in the centre. This is the first experience of displacement for the two women I talked to, one of whom ironically, is a health co-ordinator for an NGO. Their strength is taking solace in survival. The women said that during their journey a town they had just past through, Echilampattu, was destroyed. War is not something abstract. "If we lose our belongings we can earn them again", they say. "If we lose our lives what is everything for?"



Figure 1 Families have small partitioned areas in the school

International NGOs are stepping in to try to help families meet basic needs but the crisis precipitated quickly so support is slow. At the moment EHED, a local Catholic NGO, is playing a co-ordinating role at the SMV School and is supporting families to get food rations from the government and co-ordinating the various needs. A pressing issue was school for the children, bored at living in cramped conditions in a basic school with few trees for shade. Local schools, already overcrowded, have now offered to take pupils. The toilet facilities in the Centre are basic and families can not cook yet for themselves so there is little to take their minds off their new label, 'the displaced'.



Figure 2 Young children in the camp looking forward to restarting school, Batticaloa 30/08/2006

Families did not seem keen to move back to Mullur. To them peace and the memories of the window of calm the ceasefire offered seem far away. In addition, tensions have developed in the last few months between Muslims and Tamils living in Mullur. Families living in Mullur town said that the LTTE issued a letter warning Muslims to leave the area as there have been killings of LTTE cadres by militant Muslims. Some militant Muslims had subsequently taken revenge on Tamils who may not have been affiliated to the LTTE so families are scared of reprisals. What is interesting to note is that Mullur was predominantly Tamil in the 1950s but is a more mixed population now of Muslims and Tamils due to government resettlement. Now there is a lull in fighting and the UN has expressed some 'concern' about the return of Muslims from Kantale back to Mullur fearing pressure 'from political leaders'.

Other Memories of the East

The East was not always a powder keg. It has some of the most beautiful beaches in Sri Lanka. One woman living in Colombo notes that her family used to visit the East regularly, "to Batticaloa, to Kalkudah and Pasikudah. Batt had a normal beach, very popular in the 70s. 1983 changed things. I actually went to Trinco in early 1983, I didn't go back until 1998. Since 1983 things have become more Colombo-centred and South-centred".

Non-combatants in the East deserve a life free from terror and lawlessness. At the moment the security situation is so bad that attributing blame for various killings is difficult and because of lack of justice for disappearances in the 1990s families are not confident that their cases will be investigated. During my one week stay there were several incidents including the execution of 5 Tamil youths. The shadow of the brutal killing of 17 Action Contre Faim aid workers in Mullur on August 5th has meant low morale amongst local aid workers, an incident which the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) recently attributed to Government forces. The principal theme of Philip Alston's recent report (UN Special Rapporteur on extra-judicial killings, summary and arbitrary executions) is that extrajudicial killings, if left unchecked, have the potential to fatally undermine the peace process and to plunge Sri Lanka back into the dark days of all out war.

Lack of access to communities in crisis

In addition lack of access to uncleared areas makes understanding the ground reality for those trapped in these areas difficult. Reports from people in these areas say that the LTTE has started compulsory 'self-defence training' for all living there whilst the prohibition imposed by the Government on NGOs travelling to uncleared areas in August means food shortages. The human cost of current hostilities is simply too hard to bear.

I first visited Sri Lanka shortly after the Peoples' Alliance (PA) coalition government was elected to office on a peace and reform platform in August 1994. Then President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge began a process of dialogue with the LTTE. At that moment in history it seemed possible to imagine an end to protracted conflict. Despite six rounds of peace talks under different governments the political crisis in Sri Lanka has deepened. Today discourses of diversity and peace seem increasingly under attack. International NGOs seem to be a collective scapegoat which makes their work in crisis and access to civilians caught in uncleared areas difficult.

The Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) which played a monitoring role during the ceasefire has had a bad press. True, its mandate limited its role to observation and recording rather than action. At least when the SLMM was present incidents were recorded and follow up visits set in place. In a time of uncertainty with killings on the increase their shrunken presence due to the removal of the Swedish monitors means that a climate of impunity prevails. Sri Lanka

desperately needs the support of an international human rights monitoring mission.

Sri Lanka appears to be going through what I term a politics of aphasia. Aphasia is a disorder of the nervous system, characterised by partial or total loss of the ability to communicate. A culture of violence has consolidated itself through propaganda and the demonising by each side of the other. This culture of violence is not confined to the two warring parties. Bipartisan politics has been infected by political thuggery. Media censorship is also key to a politics of aphasia, since without reliable information, rumours and silence open up the space for mythology and symbolism.

The people who suffer most during this period of aphasia are those who are forgotten like the ordinary families I met in Batticaloa town. It is hard to imagine the psychological impact of living in a town under self-imposed curfew for over a decade. Non-combatants in the district are citizens and have the right to live free from fear. These families have names and hobbies and aspirations for their children. They are not simply 'beneficiaries' or 'the displaced'. They have identities beyond the politicisation of their lives into ethnic categories or stigmatized generic labels. People in Batticaloa want to listen to local poets like *Thimilai Thumilan* or enjoy village performances like *Villupattu* without worrying about their children and staying out after dark. They struggle to manage as the price of basic foods goes up due to lack of transport and they need to have access to their paddy fields many of which are in uncleared areas.

The war event

In Sri Lanka we live in the middle of a 'war-event' which has become over time a kind of twisted normality. The 'war-event' has become a normality to many Sri Lankans. When I use the term normality, I am not attaching any normative presuppositions to this noun. Normality in this text refers to what is regular, common. The stench of violence - the disgust and anger it ought to produce, has faded in Colombo, faded to a whiff of unease in the humid afternoons. The political space in Sri Lanka is a place where people expect violence to happen. Perhaps people in the capital are fatigued by petty political bickering but they must remember their lives are so much better than those in the East. It's time to reject aphasia and reach out to those for whom war is not abstract. War has too high a human cost and it will not bring about a long term solution. A political solution which invites all communities to share in the long conversations that need to be had about a possible peace with justice is not only necessary but urgent.

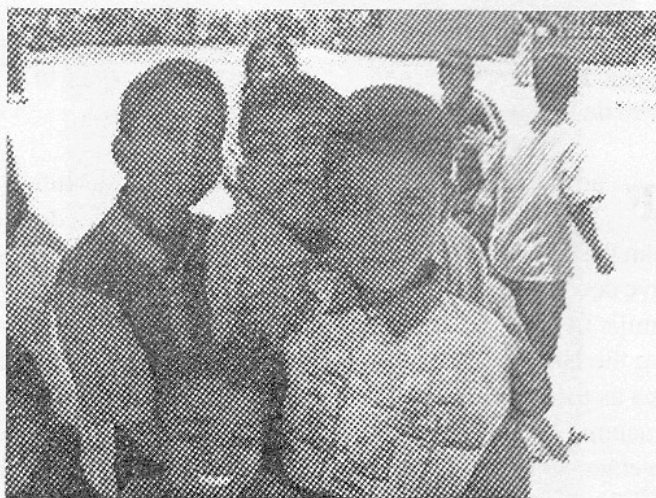


Figure 3 Children making their own games at the SMV School, Batticaloa, 30/08/2006.