

IMPRESSIONS OF BATTICALOA BACK TO 'NORMAL'

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As we approached the city by air from Amparai, Batticaloa lay calm and serene, fields of green rice paddies extending as far as the eye could see on one side and the blue of the lagoon and the sea on the other. This was an illusion soon to be shattered.

The airforce base at Batticaloa was fortified with bunkers and sentry posts. The entrance to Batticaloa town was guarded by the Army and secured with road blocks. Our first meetings were with the Brigadier of the area and the Government Agent both of whom told us that 'normalcy' had been restored in Batticaloa; normalcy, we quickly discovered, was the functioning of schools, hospitals, the GA's office, and trade between the hours of 8 and 5 in the Batticaloa island and less regularly, in some of the outlying areas. This normalcy has been bought at the cost of hundreds of disappearances and deaths in the period July '90 to January '91, (3,418, we were told by the Batticaloa Peace Committee) when sheer weight of military presence and brutal military operations 'cleared' the area for the resumption of 'civilian' life within a heavily fortified Batticaloa town. Wherever we went, hundreds of women and old men pursued us with details of sons and daughters who had disappeared during that period. The military admits to a 'bad period' which took place conveniently under the command of a different set of officers.

As dusk falls, the entire town is emptied of the visible presence of its inmates; the military, a combined force of

army, navy, airforce and police personnel, then patrol the town to ensure that no Tigers gain access to it under cover of night. We were later to discover that nefarious activities took place in the night while the town slumbered uneasily; our first night was disturbed by the incessant sound of dogs barking. We assumed they were barking at passing patrols. The next morning, however, just a few hundred yards from where we were staying, two smouldering bodies were discovered.

The next day begins with the checking of all persons coming into the town and the recording of all vehicles passing into it, and so the cycle continues. Within a mile in any direction of the last military check point in the town are mobile Tiger patrols, young men in distinctly Tiger striped fatigues, assault rifles and incongruous rubber slippers, in their turn stopping and checking individuals and vehicles.

Three miles to the south of Batticaloa is Kathankudy, today a ghetto of Muslims and obviously a fertile breeding ground for every form of fundamentalism. Small wonder, for no Muslim dares venture out of Kathankudy without the protection of a military escort. This is provided three times a week, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, when the military mounts what is called a picket along this stretch of main road. A picket means around 100 soldiers marching single file along both sides of the road, peering into scrub, paddy land and non-existent homesteads on the look out for 'tigers'. Temporary picket points (camps of infantry battalions) along the way support the pickets and buses and other vehicles with armed escort move Muslims into Batticaloa town. This in effect make the Muslims virtual prisoners in their own villages. We were told that only three large Muslim 'villages' exist anymore in Batticaloa, sheltering a large population of Muslims who have migrated into them from the outlying peripheral Muslim

Kumudini Samuel was one of three Sri Lankans who accompanied a Canadian 'fact-finding' mission to Batticaloa in January this year.

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villages. These are Kathankudy, Eravur and Oddamavadi/Vallaicheni. Kathankudy is heavily militarised. At the entrance to the town is a heavily guarded Army barricade; a few yards away on the main road is a school converted into a Military camp; police, soldiers and armed civilians (we were informed that these were the Muslim Home Guard) patrol the town. Our first stop in Kathankudy was the Kathankudy Mosque at which 104 Muslims were gunned down. All the victims of this massacres are buried in a walled garden in front of the Mosque. The interior of the Mosque is pock-marked with bullet holes serving as a constant reminder of the massacre to worshipping Muslims. We met the Mosque and Muslim Federation of Kathankudy. These people are angry and vehement in their condemnation of the LTTE who they are convinced were the perpetrators of the attack on the Mosque. The massacre at the Kathankudy mosque has come to represent the 'wailing wall' of the Muslims. The entire incident is documented on paper and on video in all its gruesome and macabre detail.

The Muslims here are convinced that the greater plan of the LTTE is to rid the Eastern Province of the presence of all Muslims. They point to the LTTE expulsion of Muslims from the North as proof of this allegation. Their reactions to the present situation are based entirely on that premise.

What then of the Tamil civilian population? No one lives in the vicinity of the Muslim areas. All those Tamils who did so in the past are in refugee camps in Batticaloa. People talk of the border; border areas; border conflicts. One always in the past identified the border to mean that between Sinhala and Tamil areas. In Batticaloa there are two borders: one between the Sinhala and Tamil areas and the other between the Muslim and Tamil areas. Tamil civilians living on the 'other' side of the border report infringements by the Muslim home guard and the military. An obviously non-aligned young Tamil teacher articulated for us the problems caused by the lack of civilian structures that could address and alleviate the problem of Tamil civilians sandwiched between the Jihad and the Tigers.

The Muslim and Tamil communities in Batticaloa are thus completely estranged. An outside solution to the problem remains non negotiable. Mr. Thondaman's proposals were dismissed out of hand by the Muslims. The breakdown in trust between these two communities is complete and seems irrevocable at the present time. Some moderate opinion seems amenable to consider a devolved unit for the Muslims; extreme opinion is not willing to listen to anything, indulging only in anger and hopes of revenge. Then to compound matters, the

state has armed a Muslim home guard of whom the Tamils live in mortal fear. There is a belief among them that the home guard is made up of the Jihad, completing the trinity of armed actors in the region.

One of our visits was to Kokkadichcholi, the scene of a massacre by the army. The military did not object to our visiting the area but warned us that they had not been on the road leading to the area in three months. Half a mile past the final airforce check point in the outskirts of Batticaloa town, we met a Tiger patrol, who checked the vehicle and passed it. The road passed mostly through cultivated paddy fields, belonging to whom we couldn't figure. No villages were seen on this stretch. Occasionally we passed by uncultivated patches overgrown with scrub. There was virtually no traffic, either on foot or bicycle. Occasional kades on the road had a few people. About three miles later, the driver decided a turn off was necessary. However the road appeared to have an open ditch across it and flattened buildings on the side of it. We were told this was an abandoned army camp. We proceeded along this after mending the ditch upto an army camp a couple of miles up the road, literally in the middle of nowhere, heavily fortified, with perhaps the capacity to hold a hundred soldiers. The two fresh faced soldier boys huddled in sand bags at the entrance looked no more than 18. When they discovered we were Sinhala speaking one of the boys asked for Sinhala newspapers and magazines. By admission of the command in Batticaloa, the military had not been on this stretch for three months; so one assumes that this is one of the camps supplied by air. One could palpably feel the fear in the air. It was difficult to imagine how anyone there slept at night, let alone during the day. One wondered what a boy of 18 having to live in an absolutely hostile environment, knowing that death was lurking behind any bush or tree, felt about defending that bit of the *mavubima*.

We passed the camp and proceeded to the village of Kokkadichcholi. It looked a very poor hamlet, with an overwhelming majority of women and children - maybe averaging five children below 12 per family. Some of them had given evidence before the Commission of Inquiry, odd groups of people such as we had visited the village; there seems to have been a lot of talking and nothing much else done for the villagers. In a while, after the final report on the Kokkadichcholi case is drawn, the village will pass again into oblivion. Even the number of civilians killed in the massacre is destined to remain in dispute; the villagers claim 123 civilians were killed; the military places the figure at 67.

On one side of the village was access to the lagoon and probably many routes to and from many places. Its location, →

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like many other villages of its type, make it extremely vulnerable for use and misuse in guerrilla warfare and its inevitable fall out. After some time we took our superfluous presence away and retraced our way back. On reaching the broken ditch, we left the vehicle and beheld nonchalantly coming towards us two young Tigers armed to the teeth. They proceeded to inform us, very casually, that they had laid an ambush for our vehicle, since it was unmarked and was observed going towards the army camp; luckily for us, the Tigers had decided to check our civilian credentials before blowing us up! We assumed that they had got word of us from the village. So much for who controls the east!

We also had a *bona fide* meeting with the Tiger command in Batticaloa - Karikalan and two others (one an English speaking doctor in civvies). The meeting place was off Chenkaladi - about five miles on and 45 minutes of walking along disused rice paddies into a very small hamlet set in the middle of some scrub. The village seemed to contain about 10 thatch-walled and roofed huts; a mud plastered meeting place (maybe the grama sevaka's office); a school room and adjoining that, in the middle of a beautifully cool grove of mango trees, 3 wattle and daub houses. In the middle of this grove were set a table behind which sat the Tiger chiefs and a number of benches, school room style, on which we were expected to sit! The Tiger girls stood to the right of us at a slight distance, while Tiger boys, took over the guarding of the leaders and stood around us with their guns. The discussion was interesting. The Tigers say they can win a military confrontation, but do not want it because of the possibly high toll of civilian life; the Sri Lankan military will not spare them in an offensive. Therefore negotiations are desirable and possible so long as they can have similar rights as the Sinhalese within the Tamil nation which can co-exist together with the Sinhala nation. They accept Thondaman's proposals as a basis for negotiations. However, they will not lay down arms because they are the sole 'protectors' of the Tamil civilians, if not for them, the decimation of the Tamils would be much greater! What of the Muslims? They have always lived in peaceful co-existence with the Muslims. Kathankudy? That was staged by the Sri Lankan Army in collaboration with the TELO to drive a wedge between the Tamil and Muslim communities, in

particular between the Muslims and the Tigers! and so on ... Finally, they video-taped us and took, by my count, 3 film rolls of still photographs. We were conducted from the meeting to the buildings adjoining the school room to meet about 100 villagers who were gathered there, seated on the ground, very reminiscent of similar village scenes in India.

No Tamil civilians we spoke to in Batticaloa were willing to commit themselves on the merger or on the shape of a future political solution. Those were, they said, matters for the state and the LTTE to negotiate and settle. Even the majority of the dons at the Eastern University were willing to abdicate this responsibility to the Tigers. They were also bitter at the paucity of state support for the university. The hint that this was due to a Muslim Minister of Higher Education says much for inter-ethnic relations in Batticaloa. Also, the Eastern University campus at Vantharamoolai is now a purely Tamil campus. The 350 Muslim students who were studying there have been compelled to leave, displaced, or rather hopefully, placed in one of the other universities.

The Batticaloa district, according to the GA, has a refugee population of 20,000 families in and outside camps, being fed by the state. 33 welfare centres are maintained in Batticaloa; giving shelter to 2,375 families; 935 Muslim families and 49 Sinhala families.

Nowhere during our visit did we meet with Sinhala civilians; no one mentioned the Sinhalese. On inquiry we heard that the temple in town was being renovated and that some traders were quietly moving into town. There were also absolutely no civilian structures operational where one could have discussed the situation of civilians - civilians, it was apparent, had to serve the interests of many masters - the military, the LTTE, the Jihad. At least in Jaffna, they either obey or disobey one master!

We were able to meet all representations of opinion in the region. It was my first visit to Batticaloa and I must say, I was deeply affected by the experience. My contention would be that the people of the east are the real and most defenseless victims of the ethnic conflict. With every passing moment my feeling was that they were caught in a trap that was only tightening about them. ■