

A long-time resident of Jaffna, who wishes to remain anonymous, speaks of the aridity of life under the LTTE. This is also an indication of the diversity of views in Jaffna and reveals the dangers of a cribing an ideological homogeneity to the Tamil people.

WHAT REMAINS...

**War is the means by which nations escape from time.
J.G. Ballard, *The Kindness of Women*.**

I steal the title, What Remains, from a slender German novel written by Christa Wolf, perhaps the most sensitive of the writers who lived and were able to publish in the German Democratic Republic— Was bleibt. Written during the decade preceding and published just after the fall of the Communist government of “East Germany”, the novel presents the situation of a writer who is suspected of subversive activities or ideas. Gradually she realizes that she is being watched everywhere she goes, as well as at home. Even her telephone calls are monitored. She refers to the spies of the secret police as “the watchers”. She is so familiar with their presence in her life, their cars parked in front of her home, that she thinks of offering them tea, but then thinks better of it.

Wolf, like her heroine, had some faith in a socialist future for her people, certainly enough to allow her to stay in her country while expressing her personal disappointments through her fiction. Yet from her very first novel, one can sense the obvious disillusion with a party system that brooks no opposition; with the first election in the GDR we see her heroine realizing, with a sinking feeling, that this system is going to be much like the totalitarian system of the Third Reich. Still, she has high hopes for its different purposes. It is in this connection that the protagonist of Was bleibt finds her “watchers” Indicrous—they’re wasting their time by destroying the future for which they are not working.

This loss of faith leads her to the conviction that the totalitarian communist system of the GDR is intent solely on preserving itself. And thus she is driven into a state of depression about her own work, her country, and her society, the latter maybe most depressing, for whom can she trust? The hope of the society turns out to be a type of young person that the police try to turn away from a “public” reading, to which only party officials and system-trusted colleagues were invited. An interesting irony at the conclusion of this reading from her works is a gift put in her hands by a man dressed as a member of the proletariat but who is actually a clergyman, one of the professionals most dishonoured in the GDR, the most honoured, of course, being the worker. The reader senses that this portion of the novel reflects the rapidly moving events just before the Wall fell in 1989.

The question, however, or the statement (there is no question mark), the novelist wishes to leave with the reader is the title— What Remains, period (full stop), or question mark, that nuance being left to the individual reader. It is certainly meant both ways. What does remain of the ideals sincere people put into the development of an avowedly socialist state? or, behold! here is what remains.

It is this double possibility expressed in these two simple words that I would like to apply to the situation of the Tamil population of Sri Lanka. After the experiences of the year AD 1995, the observer of the Tamil situation is faced with the same need for reflection. And it is not just the Tamil situation, of course, that needs reflection, but the situation of the entire island, its Sinhalese majority and its other Muslim minority, largely Tamil speaking.

One novel written by a Sinhalese Sri Lankan, Romesh Gunasekera, takes a few stabs at describing the present, against the background of memories from an earlier period. At one point in his novel, Reef, he writes:

But there were no death squads then, no thugs so callous in their killing that they felt no pleasure until they saw someone twitch against a succession of bullets. In my childhood no one dreamed of leaving a body to rot where it had been butchered, as people have had to learn to do more recently.¹

Twenty-five pages later, he reflects on the bombardments the people of Jaffna and other Tamil towns have been subjected to during the last ten years.

His observations can be coupled with a remark occurring forty pages later that takes a stab at Sri Lankan politicians:

The rest of the country, sliding into unparalleled debt, girded itself for a change of a completely different order: a savage brutalizing whereby our chandiwas—our braggarts— would become thugs, our dissolutes turn into mercenaries and our leaders excel as small time megalomaniacs.²

The question or statement, as I see it, is not only What Remains, but What Has Become of Sri Lankan Society. The brutalization of the Sinhalese population has brought about the reaction of a determined segment of Tamil youth. And this segment, in its determination, has felt it necessary to become something like the government under which Christa Wolf spent her adult life, until recently. Solidarity was one of the proclaimed goals in her country. But Herbert Lehnert, in his essay on Mrs. Wolf’s novel, “Fiktionalitat und autobiographische Motive,”³ describes the “alienation”, and I translate from the German, “of every individual in a system of power that in truth prevents the promised and propagated solidarity through its system of control”. And again: “There is therefore solidarity only on the other side of the power of the socialist state as it actually exists”.

We have seen the solidarity of the LTTE (and other similar organizations) to create a separate Tamil state undermined in recent years by a similar development—solidarity prevented by a total system of

control that brooks no opposition. And particularly in the last six months this system has led to alienation as significant segments of the public have understood the primary purpose of those fighting for this separate state to be the preservation of their organization. Lehnert puts it, in terms of Christa Wolf's novel, thus:

What will remain is not the totalitarian power that is self-preserving but the young people who have not allowed themselves to be driven away by the police [from her "public reading"]".⁴

This is really a very positive result, if it is what Mrs. Wolf really meant. Translated into Jaffna terms, I would have to substitute the middle-aged and the elderly for the young people (or the most of them), somewhat less positive or hopeful, because of the age factor. For here it is those who have refused to be driven away from their homes who have "voted with their feet". In either society the action, or the inaction, taken has not been without risk. And in Jaffna it has occurred despite the incidents of terror bombing perpetrated by the government forces that became immediate propaganda assets for the LTTE in recruiting new members.

The Italian Jewish author Primo Levi, who so well described his days in the Auschwitz death camp, succinctly describes the situation that also obtains in Jaffna, in his book The Drowned and the Saved: The pressure that a modern totalitarian state can exercise over the individual is frightful. Its weapons are substantially three: (1) direct propaganda or propaganda camouflaged as upbringing, instruction, and popular culture; (2) the barrier erected against pluralism of information; (3) and terror.⁵

All three types of repression described by Levi have been practiced by the LTTE, particularly in the Northern Province, where their rule has been absolute since 1990. Street drama, theater, and popular music have all been used to inculcate separatist principles; educational and social service organizations have been used to promote the image of the organization as well as the public welfare. Information has been completely infiltrated or eliminated; no outside newspapers are sold (although recently a few copies of Sunday papers published in Colombo could be bought in Jaffna). And the mail embargo has eliminated other outside sources like magazine subscriptions. The Tiger radio competed with Sri Lankan radio in onesided news reporting.

Terror has been a major policy in securing the pacification of the public and in coercing its cooperation. Leading political figures, of course, but also leaders in education, schools and university, leaders in business and government, all have been gunned down if seen as a threat to LTTE hegemony. (I speak here of terror among the Tamils themselves, not of assassinations of national leaders in Sri Lanka or India). And then the organization has imposed onerous taxes on the citizenry in order to support its work. Just before the Army began its last siege of Jaffna, the LTTE had demanded a half month's salary in both September and October from all employees of the state, like teachers, etc. And it made often excessive assessments on others. Prices have also been very high, from double the Colombo price to as much as one-hundred times the normal with scarce items like

petrol, for example. Much pressure has been put on school principals to encourage children to join. Video tapes of recent disasters, such as the Naval bombing, where about 120 were killed immediately, were shown everywhere to such captive audiences, followed by one-to two-hour exhortations. Just before the Army got to Jaffna and before the population was told to evacuate, even many university students were recruited at the last minute. Instances of resistance to the exhortations have been reported, and it was not easy for the LTTE to recruit recently until the Naval bombing took place and until it appeared that the Army would move into Jaffna.

Since fear has played such a big part in gaining the cooperation of the public, it is very difficult to estimate the support for the LTTE or to estimate the anti-LTTE sentiment. The fear, on the other hand, of the armed forces is also still strong, which accounts to a large measure for the public's obeying the orders to leave Jaffna (as well as the area west of town). Yet it has been surprising to find how many people simply withdrew behind closed doors and windows to await the arrival of the Army, although the excuse given the Tigers was that people had seen the plight of the refugees in Chavakachcheri and other points east, even if they hadn't gone there and actually seen it, and then came back to this area to avoid that crush and to avoid the bombing and shelling in the area between Palaly and Jaffna town.

While the situation in Jaffna has resembled to a certain extent the situation presented by Christa Wolf in her novel, it could be said that the situation in the Eastern Province more closely resembles that of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. It was not simply a war of religion, although for many this was crucial; it was also a war of the balance of power between principalities subject to the Emperor as well as a balance of religious practice. It was also a war of suppressed nationalities, like the Czech or the Dutch, and concurrent language conflicts. Some towns were razed more than once, as Jaffna has been. But the Empire itself was very much gerrymandered in its loyalties and its religious adherences, as is the Eastern Province. While the invasion of the IPKF was first seen as one of salvation, as Protestants saw the Swedish king Gustav's sweep through Germany, it turned into an occupation not unlike Spain's in Germany, with its Inquisition. Ricarda Huch, in her account of that terribly destructive war, describes a scene that much resembles our own recent experiences of panic in Jaffna.⁶ She tells of two small boatloads of very young nuns fleeing from the Swedish forces down the River Rhine from the convent at Dadenberg. The nuns are crying and wailing that they are lost; some want to throw themselves into the river. But the abbess commands the girls to be quiet, calling over to them from her boat to remember their promises to be God's women, his spiritual wives, and not to wail like peasant girls. If God has sent them such a severe trial, they must pray to time and put their souls in His hands. And the words of their mother superior seem to calm them and they begin to sing until it grows dark. At this they look back towards the convent and see the glow of the fire set there by the Swedes. Nevertheless, they continue with fortitude on their way, soothed at least by the fact that they have rescued the most important and valuable documents and relics. One girl raises up a bone to show the abbess, who recognizes it as the jawbone of St. Adrian, which they will then be able to present to the Jesuits of Cologne when they arrive there and

praises the girl. They are then all jubilant at this discovery.

In the situation in Jaffna I would say that where there has been encouragement to stay in one's place, rather than run (and the experiences of panic and of running in July helped to prepare this change of heart), provided by a few religious and social leaders, there has developed a sense of community and mutual helpfulness that one had not noticed previously. It has been inspiring to see this come to pass. Yet the organization is still among us, even though we west of Jaffna have been completely cut off from both the LTTE state as well as the Army occupation. The boys and the girls of the LTTE staying behind are as determined as ever to fight for their separate Tamil Eelam and have frequently accused those staying behind as traitors.

Justice Chatterji, a character in Vikram Seth's delightful epic-size novel of Indian society and politics and education in 1951-52, △ Suitable Boy, reflects, while perusing the All India Reporter: Calcutta 1947 and 1948.

In microcosm those two pages reflected the passage of an empire and the birth of two countries from the idea—tragic and ignorant—that people of different religions could not live peaceably together in one.⁷

In Jaffna, we are still left with the opening question, or statement—What Remains. And it may as well be a question rather than a statement. For we don't know what remains, yet. And we ask ourselves now what indeed does remain of the aspirations of the Tamil people, to live with their own language, without harrassment, military, economic or otherwise, with their own Tamil Hindu culture (or their Tamil Christian culture), with their own Tamil speaking law enforcement, their own administration, their own hopes and ambitions for their children and their homeland? This is the question that remains unanswered.

NOTES

1. P. 42 (Granta Books, Viting: London, 1994)
2. P. 118 (Ibid)
3. In Weimarer Beitrage, Heft 3/1991, p. 437
4. Ibid., p. 438
5. P. 29. (Summit Books, New York; 1988)
6. Der Dreissigjahrige Krieg, Vol. II 591ff. (Frankfurt/Main, 1947; first published 1914)
7. P. 469. (Viking/Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 1993)

INDIAN ELECTIONS AND SRI LANKA

The results of the Indian elections are just being announced and it seems clear that the Bharatiya Janata Party has emerged as the largest party in the Lok Sabha. They have not been able to obtain an overall majority and whether they could form the government is still uncertain. Nevertheless, their policies are likely to receive greater recognition now; their attitude to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is therefore of interest.

In their election manifesto, in the section dealing with foreign policy, they have declared:

The BJP greatly regrets the continuing bloodshed in Sri Lanka, particularly as India all throughout its history has had warm fraternal ties with all sections of the population in that country. The BJP is confident that within a united Sri Lanka it should be possible to fulfil the aspirations of the Tamil people.

This indicates support for a political solution that will meet with the rights of the Tamil people to regional autonomy.

The BJP proposals for dealing with the problem of the Tamil refugees still remaining in South India are also of interest:

1. House them in refugee camps and monitor their movements

2. Prevent their association with local organisations or opening local chapters of Sri Lankan organizations

3. Screen the antecedents of the Tamil refugees and disallow asylum to those who have or had links with Tamil terrorists

4. Maintain a register of all such refugees

5. Repatriate Tamil refugees as soon as the situation is conducive for their safe-being.

These proposals would indicate a desire to insulate politics in India and in Tamilnadu from events in Sri Lanka.

We also learn from N.Ram, the editor of Frontline, who was in Colombo last week that the Tamil problem in Sri Lanka and the role, of the LTTE received no mention at all in the election campaign in Tamilnadu.

Sinhala nationalists who are always apprehensive of Tamilnadu infiltration into Sri Lankan politics might now rest assured that the ethnic problem is ours to solve or to die with.