

JAFFNA: CURRENT SITUATION & PROSPECTS :

THE POLITICAL MOOD

It is hazardous and even meaningless to provide a generalized political judgement on a place where there has been no open discussion for more than fifteen years and reading materials continue to be effectively censored. By means of both the written and the spoken word, the people in Jaffna continue to be exposed to propaganda that glorifies the LTTE and gives the message that its return is inevitable. In such an ambience, one needs to exercise great care in making judgements.

Among the class of people who are socially conscious and have a sober political outlook, the rejection of the LTTE is overwhelming. This class would include many, who for a time thought that the LTTE had a role in countering the oppressiveness of the Sri Lankan State. There is also a large group among the elite of administrators, clergy, businessmen and intellectuals who had earlier been favoured by the LTTE regime and remain favoured following the change of regime (who would remain fence sitters.) But the nuances in their articulation would reflect a pro-LTTE slant. It is this class that counts the most in what passes for Tamil opinion in NGO and peace fora in Colombo. They have two main reasons for this role, they need to justify their services to a very oppressive LTTE regime, and it is moreover the LTTE which, for its own purposes, welded them together and gave them the position of influence they command today. Where Jaffna is concerned, this influence is stifling in every respect.

Another class comprises persons whose plight must be viewed sympathetically. They are persons earlier associated with the LTTE, their families and families of LTTE cadre. Many of them became compromised through no fault of their own. The disappearances from July last year mostly affected this group. Many of them are continually subject to pressure from both the army and the LTTE. A large number of those who remain trapped in the Vanni belong to this category.

The experience of those remaining, who form the majority, during and after the forced exodus of October 1995, generated much anger against the LTTE. This is particularly strong among those who have returned from the Vanni. During that period they saw the LTTE nakedly as callous and doing everything possible to extort their money and possessions, on the one hand, and their children for its forces, on the other. Yet their disposition should be regarded as fluid to the extent that nothing else has come to fill the vacuum left by the LTTE.

Many of them returned to Valikamam to face abject poverty, houses that had ceased to exist and fields infested with mines laid by both the security forces and the LTTE, with no concern for civilian victims. The government's repeated promises of rehabilitation and reconstruction remain for the most part unrealized. Owing to difficulties in transportation, many who have returned to agriculture

are unable to make ends meet - often inputs do not arrive in time or products do not sell at viable prices.

A change in the direction of Jaffna will come about only when the latter group of people becomes convinced that there is a definite qualitative change in their prospects and a system of governance that works. True they have seen that the Army is no longer the murderous one that they once saw it as. They have dimly seen that protest without repercussions is possible and that a society where law and order prevail with no arbitrary exactions is, at least, conceivable. The rest needs imagination rather than huge resources.

Freedom of Expression & Organization

A need for a diversity in newspapers and in the printed word is deeply felt but has proved very hard to realize in the context of Jaffna. The chief obstruction is the real threat posed by the LTTE which used its agents to promptly smell out any development that would pose a long-term threat to it. The slightest talk that the LTTE is prying into something suffices for a warning. A second obstruction is the absence of presses. During its reign the LTTE took over nearly all the presses which have either been moved to the Vanni, or were lost during transportation there. *Uthayan* is at present the only newspaper published in Jaffna and owns the only press that could print mass circulation journals. It also commands a monopoly over the only block-making facilities. Attempts to start a weekly simply to promote democratic values fizzled out once it was brought to bear that the odds were against such an attempt.

The *Uthayan* and the privately owned Tamil papers that come from Colombo, all for a mixture of reasons of fear or empathy, by what is said or not said, or how things are said, at least implicitly legitimize the politics of the LTTE. Prose or verse available in shops in Jaffna conform to the same criteria. Even when they seem to be saying something different, there is a calculated ambiguity. For example, no publication has given a hint of the deep anger felt by the mass of the people against the LTTE over what they experienced during and after the forced exodus of 1995.

There is, on the other hand, a large segment of opinion that sees the present drift as inimical to the future of the Tamils, and the contrived expressions that are passed off as Tamil opinion as definitely mischievous. Through their experience they feel that: the government's political package with its shortcomings must be viewed positively and implemented expeditiously, the military presence in Jaffna must be accepted as the inevitable outcome of Tamil politics, but that its bad effects should be controlled through organized democratic means; and that making future arrangements for the Tamil community contingent upon the LTTE's participation is essentially futile. As important as it is, this segment of opinion remains stifled and the brainwashing of the public goes on at various

levels. Several organizations have sprung up to deal with missing persons. In several villages (e.g. Kaputhoo and Pandeteruppu) villagers have spontaneously come forward to confront the army over the treatment of detainees during round-ups. These are hopeful signs. But in the absence of healthy mass politics, these stand to be hijacked, misused for destructive ends.

Power & Administrative Accountability

As suggested earlier, there is little administrative accountability and the people have almost no control over regulating their very basic needs. Two instances amply illustrate this. Following the recent threat to shipping issued by the LTTE, that was given prominence as banner headlines in the *Uthayan*, kerosene oil was hoarded by traders, and what was sold for Rs. 13.50 per litre started fetching Rs. 70. Protestations by the military authorities that there were sufficient stocks made little impact and appeared as a minor item on the front page. The public had been reduced to being helpless individuals who had no means to counter the cynicism with which alleged shortages were manipulated by private interests.

There were widespread complaints of corruption against a key public official holding a commanding position in the distribution of resources. The government sent a team of investigators to Jaffna, and the official sensed trouble. A number of advertisements were placed in the *Uthayan* by traders and other interests praising his services to the community. A felicitation ceremony was organized for him, where speakers included leading academics from the University of Jaffna, educationists and some prominent religious figures, all praising him as a great servant of the public. It was an unusual event and perhaps the first of its kind in Jaffna. Nevertheless the official was replaced.

These illustrate the kind of interests brought together by the LTTE, who continue to hold society in a vice-like grip. Artificial shortages were a means of regular income for the LTTE and its favoured traders. The administrative machinery was used to suck resources, the government sent for the people, dry. A well-known ruse was to pad up population figures for extra government rations taken over by the LTTE. In the matter of development funds and funds for co-operatives, contracts worth tens of millions of rupees were given to LTTE-front organizations for work that never got done. The result was an enormous corrupting influence on the administrative machinery. Many administrators learnt to use the LTTE as a scapegoat to have their own way with the public. The term 'public servant' lost any residual meaning.

The education authorities too contributed towards implementing the LTTE's alternative curricula. All school functions had to be held in the mornings, the reason being that students should be loitering in the streets in the afternoons and evenings to facilitate their being accosted and carried away by LTTE recruiters. Senior academics of the university, too, with their inspiring speeches and other gimmicks, completed the trap for the sons and daughters of impoverished peasants and out-of-work artisans to be lured into battle. These tales of hypocrisy and duplicity would cover volumes.

Jaffna before & after the Army Take-over

It is easy to pick out a few aspects of life in Jaffna and make a case that things are far worse after the army take-over, compared with what it was under the LTTE. Indeed, our reports have contained much that could be used to this end. We are now, with the help of comments and criticisms from our readers, we hope, in a better position to give a comprehensive picture.

Many of the present difficulties are strongly war-related, and there has been a steady attempt to improve, such as reducing the irritation at checkpoints, and good deal is now almost normal in urban and suburban areas. It is true that there is much clumsiness in the military administration and much dislocation with regard to resettlement. These too are partly war-related and to be fair, the army has shown itself to be sensitive to pressure and criticism. It is also well-known that newly resettled areas are quickly prone to forceful LTTE infiltration; that puts an additional strain on the Army.

Take the particular example of difficulties in travel, resulting in part from extremely poor administration on the part of military authorities. Cancellations of ships and flights, for reasons beyond control, create chaos. There is no proper rescheduling of passengers. People come from places as distant as Moolai or Point Pedro, starting early in hired cars (at heavy rates), stand in the hot sun for hours in front of what used to be the Jaffna railway station, some carrying children, go back home if their name is not called, come back the next day and perhaps for days after. There is no appeal if one's name had been wrongly missed out. One cannot be sure that places confirmed in Point Pedro and Colombo will be honored in Jaffna. The military has a serious communication problem within itself. Unless one is influential or athletic, even places confirmed by the Army's Civil Affairs Office in Jaffna have little meaning.

To place the issue in sharper focus, take the 7000 passengers to Jaffna now left stranded at Trincomalee, many for more than a month. This followed the early July LTTE burning of one ship, hijacking of another, and openly threatening all shipping to Jaffna. This has resulted in much dislocation in the lives of many ordinary people. Much anger will no doubt be directed against the government that undertook responsibility for administering and restoring normality and services in Jaffna. Although the threat to the stranded passengers is posed by the LTTE, it took a month of indecision on the part of the government before it became evident that passenger shipping to Jaffna would not resume immediately. In the next turn of the rusty wheels of government bureaucracy, it was decided to treat the stranded passengers as refugees and house them in camps. Nothing was done to address their anxieties, apprise them of alternatives or to give them regular factual briefings about what, if anything, was being done. Instead a great deal that surfaced in newspapers turned out to be mere rumours. What remained was alienation and the image of an uncaring government.

If one highlights this problem in isolation (which would disappear if the land route is opened), one would despair about Jaffna. But others are quick to point out the injustice of comparisons based on short-term considerations. During the LTTE regime, those wishing

to travel to Colombo used to queue up outside pass offices from 3 AM, not infrequently to be told later in the day that 'Iyah' was not coming. From time to time the press used to announce that there would be a boat service across Jaffna Lagoon on a particular night. Even if there were only about say 200 places, a much large number were allowed to travel by bus from Jaffna to Kilaly at Rs. 150 per head and join a long queue at Kilaly to take a number. Those who could not make it that night often had to spend several days at Kilaly, spending Rs. 150 daily eating at LTTE shops, or return to Jaffna again paying the extortionate fare. Much of this may not have been visible to the local elite or to the visitors who enjoyed special privileges. Significantly, despite local and international pressure, the LTTE consistently dragged its feet and sabotaged attempts to open the land route through Elephant Pass. The LTTE obviously was not concerned about civilian safety, but to the contrary, needed civilian cover in the lagoon for its own military communications. Despite threats posed by navy and airforce activity, LTTE-supervised passenger boats were run without long interruptions. If the civilians completed the journey in safety, it was thanks to the LTTE's protection. If occasionally something nasty happened, as during the Navy's massacre on 2 January 1993, it was grist for the LTTE's propaganda mills. The difference is that the LTTE has fewer inhibitions, a clear mind about its immediate objectives, and in this context, the ability to make quick decisions to safeguard its perceived interests.

Hence, superficial comparison on the basis of day-to-day life will not lead to a proper understanding of the underlying reality. Unless we read the political tendencies at work to discern what the future portends for the people, and the role it offers them as responsible agents, we are bound to be carelessly contributing to uncertainties and fortifying a vicious culture founded on violence and human debasement.

In the matter of human rights, there are serious concerns, such as torture and the absence of accountability for disappearances, over which unremitting pressure must be kept up. But it would be unjust to describe the current scene and future prospects as hopeless. Given the perverse and complicated nature of the situation, the fact that the parents of those who disappeared under army action have been able to organize themselves without harassment needs to be taken note of. There have also been several instances of villagers coming out defiantly to resist arrest of individuals during army round-ups—something un-imaginable under the LTTE. Moreover, the parents of several thousands who disappeared during the LTTE regime remain tongue-tied and even today no one dares to organize them to demand accountability and ask for a commission of inquiry.

In the field of social justice, one sees little prospect of change for the better. The same classes whose dominance was strengthened by the

LTTE continue to increase their hold, and by comparison, those who had suffered exceedingly because of war, displacement, privation and the exodus, will find life extremely difficult. The LTTE's repression silenced those very sections of society that were concerned about social justice.

Many, in Jaffna in particular, have been alarmed that they are being misrepresented at all levels. To the bulk of them the idea of a return of the LTTE is a nightmare. Even as it was being claimed naively or deliberately in far corners of the world that the LTTE was administering Jaffna as was never done before, it was clear to a large section of the population by mid-1995 that Jaffna could not take another two years of it. Contrary to the impression that is sought to be created about present insecurity felt by parents on behalf of their children, it is estimated that during the last few months of the LTTE regime in Jaffna, about 250 school boys and girls were practically conscripted to its ranks in the environs of Jaffna town.

What most people at present count as definite changes for the better are:

- * Greater benefits from their earnings that are no longer subject to anything like the same extortionate taxes directly or from artificial shortages on a whole variety of essentials.

- * Schools are no longer interfered with for purposes of recruitment and propaganda.

- * Parents can send their children to school or out on the streets without the fear that they would be accosted and carried away by LTTE recruiters.

- * The environment is free of almost every aspect of it being distorted by suffocating propaganda: songs glorifying the Leader and his movement, toy guns in children's parks, cutouts of dead cadres, slogans on walls etc.

The loss of freedom of movement at present, too, needs to be qualified, since reports passed around by word of mouth and often publicized, or the selective reporting in the Tamil media, tend to give an impression of extreme insecurity. Apart from the normal insecurity arising from a large military presence in a tense environment, closer examination shows that some sort of trust has also been established between the civilians and the Army. The most significant source of anxiety is the fear that someone going out may be affected by an LTTE land-mine or grenade explosion in a public place. As a general rule, civilians are affected by the explosions themselves, rather than by reprisals that have been very few.

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