
HOW NORMAL IS NORMAL?

A brief visit to Vadamarachchi - August 1997

Securing transport into Jaffna is quite a difficult task. Large numbers of Tamil civilians are stranded at Trincomalee or Mannar awaiting their turn for the limited boat transport. Air transport is available from Colombo for the twice privileged, able to pay 5,200 rupees for the trip and get on a list of passengers cleared to fly in the 44 seat Avros of Lion Air which make one or two journeys to and from the peninsula each day.

I was one of the lucky few making such a trip to Jaffna in August. The journey begins at the Ratmalana Airport. Once past the security barriers, passengers queue outside the Lion Air office on the perimeter of the runway waiting to be security-checked before boarding the plane. Bags are manually searched minutely, necessitating a longish wait before the check is finally completed. Passengers are varied and mostly Tamil; some of them obviously residents of Jaffna going back home on the completion of some business in Colombo; they sit chatting quietly. Others are obviously expatriate Tamils making the journey back to village, kith and kin; they appear relaxed but excited, their young children chattering in a mix of French, German or English. Most passengers carry three or four large bags which are destined for the hold. The ubiquitous plastic 'siri siri' bags served as cabin luggage carrying an assortment of goods from packets of Williams wafers or Uswatte jujubes to a few oranges, a plastic structure for a wedding cake and even some anthurium plants, their blooms braving the heat and plastic confinement.

Coming in to land at Palaly, one glimpses the first palmyrah trees interspersed with coconut palms and there is a sense of Jaffna approaching. Palaly is a military airbase and the Lion Air plane the only civilian passenger carrier. Milling around in the single corrugated iron shed are hundreds of soldiers and police with their knapsacks waiting to board military aircraft journeying south. The civilians on Lion Air are dislodged onto a burning hot tarmac and must await the shuttle bus transport into Jaffna town. We travel in the opposite direction in military transport to Point Pedro, our final destination.

In the next four days we travelled into some areas of Vadamarachchi - to Nelliady, Karaveddy, Puloli, Point Pedro. Along the way were little townships marked by clusters of small Kades, with new roofs, plastic utensils hanging from their rafters, bags of rice and onions, bottles of sweets; the bicycle winkle; the occasional tailor shop; the barber shop; and sometimes the pawn broker. They offer their wares to the few shoppers, their bicycles parked outside the shops. A few people were on the roads going about their daily business. In the mornings the roads were busier with white uniformed girls and blue shorts-clad boys mingling in numbers with the bright coloured sarees of their teachers, all on bikes cycling to school or to work. Occasionally, we passed road barriers, guarded by a few soldiers,

both men and women. The barriers were for the most part red and white painted wooden poles standing like sentinels by the roadside waiting to be let up or down. Almost, we missed the concrete barricades, sandbags and ever present barrels that are a feature of checkpoints in the East and in Colombo. Instead, palmyrah tree trunks seemed to be the favoured material protecting the watchful soldiers. Away from the townships were little home gardens or larger plots, pale green with sprouting onion or tobacco plants. Along the way were houses, many of them with newly tiled roofs, a mute testimony to past ravages. Others were yet to be reconstructed or were completely abandoned, their wooden door and window frames prised out of concrete walls, bare and desolate. Not everyone had returned following the exodus during operation Riviresa.

Was life normal? Yes and no.

About 400,000 persons were living in the peninsula and their physical living was more or less normal.

Prices were down, we were told; food and other goods were available in the shops, some items being even sold at controlled prices. The most expensive item going was a mega bottle of 7Up at 79 rupees; chocolates were the most popular, little bars of Kandos selling at 9 rupees, a special luxury that children were queuing up to buy as all children everywhere do. At the time we were in Vadamarachchi what was not available freely was kerosene, a household essential for a people who are mostly cut off from other sources of energy. The next day two Dvoras were unloading a consignment of kerosene at the Point Pedro jetty. This makeshift structure constructed by the army with the rubble of destroyed buildings that had lined the shore was one of the main docking points for ships from the South. The ships stopping here carry essential goods for the Army and the civilians, both at the mercy of the ship's safe passage through waters susceptible to Sea Tiger attack. July had been a particularly bad month, with the LTTE attacking two ships carrying goods to the North.

How normal, was normal? Can the North be supplied with sufficient food stocks to keep prices down? What would happen once the north east monsoons broke? Can everyone afford to continue buying food and other goods on the open market? Was the absolute dependency on air and sea transport for the supply of goods to the peninsula sustainable..? These were some of the concerns expressed to us by the people. These questions indicated some doubt about whether even the supply of goods necessary for the maintenance of physical life could be sustained.

Another major concern was the lack of jobs and sources of income, particularly for the poorer people and those who had no relatives abroad able to send money back home to those who stayed behind.

Another seemingly normal sight was that of students attending school. All of the schools we visited were functioning. Most of the damaged buildings were reconstructed either fully or partially. The premises looked well cared for. Classrooms were full. Teachers were making preparations for holding A/Level exams. Recalling memories of the devastation caused in Vadamarachchi following Operation Liberation in 1987, it was almost unbelievable that the schools were up and running in the condition they were. They were virtually like the mythical phoenix risen from the ashes. I kept recalling the nightmare vision of every single school building as it stood then, sorry shells filled with the rubble of roofs fallen in, fragments of desks and chairs, but most harrowingly, shards of glass and shreds of books, all that remained of once proud repositories of knowledge - the laboratories and libraries. Visions of school principles and librarians, their eyes filled with pain and bewilderment at the destruction, their voices choked with emotion, children sitting under trees and attempting to continue studying.

The re-built schools, the students, the teachers at Vadamarachchi. I saw and met in those four days of August, were the symbol of hope and the undisputable reason why the war must stop, must be brought to a halt and peace and dignity return. This was the proud tradition of Jaffna, of its ethos, of its being, its high premium and thirst for learning and knowledge. This was the one beacon that has been kept ablaze through all these years of destruction and suffering. If I was to measure normalcy from those days in 1987, yes, this was some semblance of normalcy. But the schools still lack a full complement of teachers, many of them having abandoned Jaffna for safer pastures. Their libraries and labs are short of books and equipment. Modern aids to learning, computers and new audio-visual and scientific apparatus are non-existent.

Another bizarre twist to what is commonly accepted as normal was illustrated by an incident on the second night of our stay in Vadamarachchi. I awoke at 3 a.m. to a cacophony of dogs howling, crows cawing and the boom of explosions seeming close at hand. Looking out of the window, I saw soldiers running towards the sea. Even to my unfamiliar ears it seemed that some sort of attack was in progress. I listened for sounds of stirring in the household and heard none. Feeling slightly reassured, I watched and listened at the window. A few minutes later the elderly gentleman, my hostess, father-in-law, appeared at the porch and sitting on its half wall proceeded to smoke a couple of cigarettes. Forty five minutes later the sound of explosions died down, the dogs and birds quietened and the troops returned. The old gentleman went back to bed and I to resume my disturbed sleep. The next morning my young hostess - she was maybe about 30 years, the mother of two little girls of 6 and 8, was up and about, neatly dressed and attending to her morning chores; her ailing mother-in-law was on her trestle bed in the hall; her mother was preparing breakfast in the kitchen. Everything seemed right in the world. I tried out my broken Tamil. -What happened last night? -Oh, that was normal. -What do you mean normal, does this happen frequently? -No, no this is about the third such incident since the Army came here. -Were you disturbed? -Oh, no last night was nothing. -Look at that bunker there. It is now sealed. In those days, the attacks were so bad we used to virtually live in the bunker. There was constant shelling from the sea or the

air and we were terrified. Almost all the buildings around here were destroyed. At one time we had to abandon this house (it was a few hundred yards away from the sea) and flee to the interior. It is normal now. How normal was normal?

I met Colonel Wijeratne, the Commander of Vadamarachchi half an hour later. A small group of LTTE cadres had attacked a military outpost a few kilometres away. He had visited the village and checked if A/Level students were able to get to their exam centres and if a pregnant woman had gone into labour. -These attacks are normal, he said. -We knew a few LTTEs had infiltrated the area and we were expecting something of this sort, the attack was successfully repulsed. How normal was normal?

The previous day, all I heard of was that the military was engaged in civilian administration. Today it was obvious that the military was also engaged in operational activity. The peninsula was ringed with bunkers. At least on the coast at Point Pedro, the bunkers were built virtually ten to fifteen metres from each other. This was how Jaffna was secured from potential sea tiger attacks and infiltration. 30,000 troops were in occupation. Most of them we saw appeared to be in their twenties. The army was young, maybe as young as the LTTE. There were also an appreciable number of women soldiers, again replicating the situation in the LTTE. Speaking to some of them, I asked what their functions were. Mostly to stand duty at check points, sometimes to be on guard at bunkers and some administration were the answers. I asked the men what they felt about women soldiers on the battlefield. They are not on the battlefield, I was told. Their's are operational duties, not combat duties, we don't send our women into battle. There was a strong element of protection inherent in the answers. Intrigued, I asked what they felt about meeting LTTE women cadres in battle. Immediately came the unexpected response. We are far more fearful of them, they fight like ten Tigers put together. Protective of your women, but fearful of the Other's? Normal?

Vadamarachchi of course is also LTTE country, its most famous town Valvettithurai the birth place of Velupullai Prabhakaran and a fertile ground for LTTE recruitment. Discrimination within the well-entrenched stratification of caste played no small part in the rise of the LTTE. To its credit the LTTE attempted to eradicate this archaic aberration from Tamil society. One of its much vaunted claims was that caste and its attendant social inequalities were no more a factor in the Jaffna it controlled. At least in Vadamarachchi I did not expect caste to feature in any conversation, either as a problem or as a concern. I was mistaken. On the plane coming in, I noticed that I was being observed as keenly as I was observing everyone else. Soon after we were airborne, a woman about my age signalled to me, obviously wanting to talk. I took the seat next to her and we fell into conversation. First in Tamil and on my floundering, we switched to English. She was curious, was I Tamil? Always a difficult question. No, I was of mixed parentage. Was I married, where was my Thali or was I a widow. No, I was neither. Then came the bouncer, was I low caste, why was I wearing silver jewellery? I have no idea what caste I belong to, I like silver jewellery. Then came the clincher, I must be Sinhalese!!! In Vadamarachchi, many of the women I talked to referred at some point to my silver

jewellery. Talking to the military, we were told that one of the main problems in the area was that of caste. It appeared that the LTTE had appointed -low caste people to many positions of importance - school boards, Kovil committees and other civil institutions. On the military's taking control, they were inundated by complaints from both sides. The -higher castes wanted the -lower castes relegated to their previous subservient positions and the -lower castes understandably did not want to give up their newly acquired social status. The military was caught in a dilemma, unable to resolve this potentially explosive situation and able only to maintain an uneasy peace between the warring factions. Certainly not a battle they were prepared for at military school.

The relationship between the military and the civilians in Point Pedro was quite marked in its apparent openness and access. A number of representatives from the Citizens Committee had praise for the Commander of Vadamarachchi, Colonel Wijeratne. In their estimation, the Vadamarachchi sector of the Jaffna peninsula had the best record in terms of the observance of human rights. In Jaffna parlance, looking at some students who I was told were preparing to sit their A-Level examination that week, one of the members of the Citizens Committee observed that Vadamarachchi got an -A, Jaffna a -B and Thenmarachchi a -C. There had indeed been reports in Colombo that disappearances were the worst in Thenmarachchi and that Vadamarachchi had not reported a single case this year. Also marked was the interaction between the Colonel and the civilians. They crowded around him at every appearance wanting some problem attended to. The military we were told maintained an office outside their camp for attending to civilian matters. Open from 7 in the morning, it had streams of civilians seeking assistance to resolve matters ranging from domestic disputes to land claims, caste concerns, school transfers, transport to Colombo, school and hospital administration, etc.

This definitely was not normal. A plethora of issues that should in reality have been dealt with by civil administrators were now in the hands of the military. While this was certainly a function that was useful to the civilian population and from the point of view of the military an exercise in winning the hearts and minds of the people, it was definitely not the job of the military. One of the officers was quite concerned that they did not have the training, the skill or the knowledge to work as public administrators and that civil administration was an area that must be handled by civilians; the military could not carry on being civil administrators for ever.

Back in Colombo we had heard that the civil administration had been restored. But the reality on the ground was different, at least in Vadamarachchi. Here, the military were still directly handling the tasks of civil administrators.

Another marked sign of non-normalcy was the absence of a Police presence. It appeared that the police force in Jaffna or at least in Vadamarachchi was quite thin. The new head of police for Jaffna had just arrived in the peninsula and it was expected that police functions would be revamped and civil and criminal matters affecting the population would be handled by the police force. At present, most of the police presence was in the vicinity of military camps or

within their protective limits. It was observed that the police was somewhat reluctant to assume duties in the interior due to security considerations and therefore many civil and criminal matters were being directed to the military. While this seemed to be the only recourse available to deal with matters of law and order, civilians were reluctant to take all problems to the military, particularly in cases where in the past they had dealt with civil administrators. It was obvious that to achieve the objective of normalcy, civilians had to assume administration, the military maintain security and police force convert to a service.

In another significant departure from the normal, Colonel Wijeratne had organised a series of meetings in Vadamarachchi to place the contents of the government's political package before the people of the area. He had invited representative from the Ministry of Justice with the single request that they explain the contents of the proposed constitutional reforms and the package for devolving power to the minorities. I should at this point explain that I went with this team as an independent observer.

The meetings were held in school halls and were attended from between 300 people on the first day to over 1500 on the last when the crowd spilled over to the school compound. I attended some of the meetings and was struck by the level of engagement and response. The presenter was a Sinhalese and had to be translated. Often, people from the audience volunteered help with the translation offering a word here and there to help it along. Obviously understanding Sinhala, many of them were older civil servants who had served in the South at some point in their lives. The audience was mixed in terms of age, occupation and class and included a fair representation of women.

The most asked question, indeed the first question, was about the merger. It was obvious that here the people did not think the merger was negotiable; they appeared to believe in the existence of a specific Tamil territory. Other frequently asked questions concerned the powers of the centre in relation to the dissolution of the regional councils; they were obviously concerned about the degree of actual autonomy a region would enjoy. Other topics that surfaced were colonisation, land, education - particularly higher education, which was not a devolved subject, finance and irrigation.

Occasionally someone dared to ask why these new arrangements were necessary when the Tamil people had overwhelmingly voted in 1977 for a separate state of Eelam. Another question that surfaced related to the Thimpu principles and a call for these to be the framework for a solution.

There was also much repartee between the Colonel and the audience. Questions would be prefaced with the observation that the speaker did not want to be penalised by the military for being critical and did not relish the prospect of finding himself in a cell the following day; the Colonel gave the assurance that the military would not detain the speaker for expressing his views; the speaker then responded by saying that he would ask the question anyway because it was within his rights to do so. It was apparent that there was some degree of rapport between the Commander and at least

some of the audience. It was also obvious that there was some degree of confidence in the Commander. One question illustrated this point. The Commander was asked why a school principal and two teachers had been arrested a few days previously, when the population had been given the guarantee that they would not be harassed. In response, Colonel Wijeratne articulated what appeared to be military analysis of the situation in the peninsula. He said that according to his assessment one in three people living in Vadamarachchi had some connection with the LTTE. Of this number, a third were those who willingly or unwillingly gave something to the LTTE - money, gold or even a child. Another third were those who were employed by the LTTE in their seran shops and their civil administration. The final third were those who actively recruited for the LTTE or coerced people into parting with their money to the organisation. Most of this category in his estimation were citizens of some stature in the community who rarely parted with either their children or their wealth but ensured by coercive means that others did so. The persons arrested he claimed, fell into this third category and had been detained following investigation over a period of time. There had also been allegations of fraud against them. These were the people, he said, the military wanted to see brought to justice. He also claimed that the arrests had followed due process and the suspects had been remanded at the KKS prison.

The Commander was also adamant that the LTTE was an undemocratic force and a deterrent to a solution and had to be weakened militarily. Whatever the sentiments of the audience on this issue,

military strategy seemed to be built on winning the minds of the people for a political solution and defeating the LTTE militarily, having driven a wedge between the people and the organisation. In Jaffna, this may have been built on an over-optimistic assessment and too simplistic a solution. The crucial questions not articulated in public, in the presence of the military, were, could the package work without the LTTE and how the LTTE could be brought into the process of a political solution. Yes, the people of Jaffna don't want war. But they want the guarantee of a permanent peace, based on a political solution which will give them self-governance and to which the LTTE is a party.

The people of Jaffna will live and let live with whoever is in authority over them, because such authority, be it the Army or the LTTE, governs them with the force of arms. Realist and pragmatic, the people might face death but they won't commit suicide. They will consider a political solution that is realistically what will finally allow them to live in dignity and in peace. But they don't yet believe, they are not yet convinced and they don't yet trust. The Kumaratunge government must prove its credentials and its bona fides to them, the Tamil people who have suffered from both the causes and the consequences of the war. The government must be present among its people in the North. Today, its only manifestation in the peninsula are 30,000 troops. Hardly a confidence inspiring attribute. The military is also aware that the government must do its job and that the job of governance cannot be relegated to the military. Time doesn't stand still in Jaffna, it is running out.

FINISHED WITH THE WAR

A Soldier's Declaration

I am making this statement as an act of willful defiance of military authority, because the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust.

I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practiced on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.

S. Sassoon

(a real letter published during World War I, for which Sassoon was court martialled and declared insane, from *Regeneration* , a novel by Pat Barker)