

BOOK REVIEW

M.R. Narayan Swamy, 1994, *Tigers of Lanka: From Boys to Guerrillas* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers), pp. 348, appendices, Price Indian Rs. 350. 00.

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, and the various attempts that were taken to resolve it, led to a proliferation of literature on the subject. To be quite frank, however, not all of them came up to the expectations of the more discerning reader - particularly those who are not easily taken in by sensationalism and ego-trips.

In my opinion, *Tigers of Lanka* by N.R. Narayan Swamy is one of the few publications on this theme which can, in fact, claim authenticity. This is largely due to the wide network of contacts, (ie the "actors" in the yet unfolding ethnic conflict) that the author managed to establish in his capacity as a journalist in India, as well as during his numerous visits to Sri Lanka. His foray to Europe in search of "ex-militants" is also well known.

Although, the title suggests that the book is about the "Tigers" - the contents transcend the "Tiger phenomenon" and lays bare the entire gamut of, in the words of the author, "the staggered growth of militancy from fits and starts in 1970s until 1983, the boost it got following India's covert involvement in Sri Lankan affairs, and the brief but disastrous experiment in government-formation in the island's northeast after the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987."

Let us see as to whether the author really succeeds in fulfilling this task.

Chapter One entitled "**A Lone Testament**" does precisely what it was meant to do - namely, to startle and shock the reader out of complacency. This short Chapter ends with one "Suresh", a former member of TLO who directly experienced LTTE's brutal attack against his organization resulting in the death of his leader and 200 other comrades, telling the author: "I have never forgiven the LTTE for the 1986 massacre. When we set out from our homes in 1983, we had great ideals, big dreams. Difficulties were considered a part of life. But after the massacre I began to question my own ideals. By the end of 1986 I had only one aim - revenge."

Chapter Two, "**Seeds of Discontent**", lays before the reader the gradual metamorphosis of non-violent forms of parliamentary struggle for Tamil rights to militancy of the "armed" variety. The author attributes this to a series of blunders by the Sinhala political leadership - or in his words "Sinhalese obduracy". This Chapter is largely based on secondary sources and is mostly common knowledge.

It is Chapter Three, "**Early Militancy**", which hits the nail squarely on the head! It, quietly and in a matter-of-fact style, dismisses the LTTE's simple equation that the emergence of

Tamil militancy equals the emergence of the LTTE. This Chapter opens with a telling comment which sets the stage for what follows thereafter: "It is virtually impossible to set a date for the genesis of Tamil militancy in Sri Lanka." (p. 23)

From that point on, Narayan Swamy begins with the *Pulip Padai* (the "Tiger Army") which was formed way back in 1961 comprising of young civil servants and professionals - but not lacking in militancy. Then he proceeds to the Tamil Liberation Organization (TLO) which was set-up in 1969 by Thanagdurai, Kuttimani and others. "The group was one of the earliest to issue out of the growing frustrations over the dilatory methods of the Federal Party. Its members decided to plunge headlong into a violent struggle".

Then he moves on to the *Tamil Manavar Peravai* (Tamil Students League), founded by Satyaseelan and Sivakumaran, and the *Tamil Elaingyar Peravai* (Tamil Youth League) in which Varatharajaperumal played a prominent role. The first instance of suicide by consuming cyanide was when Sivakumaran decided to take his own life, rather than be taken in by the Police who had him surrounded. His funeral shook Jaffna and a bronze statue which was erected in his memory came to symbolize resistance and defiance. The potency of that symbol was demonstrated by the fact that the security forces never failed to damage the statue, whenever given the opportunity!

The emergence of Eelam Revolutionary Organizers (EROS) in London in January 1975 set the stage for external linkages with the Palestinian Resistance. It also provided the forum for the emergence of militant organizations which saw the struggle as something more than the restoration of "the glories of the past".

As Narayan Swamy reveals in a later chapter, "Pathmanabha's was a classic example of the Tamil youths who left their homes... attracted by militancy, and finding salvation ultimately in Marxism" (p. 102). Nabha's entry into Tamil militancy, incidentally, precedes EROS and coincides with the phase associated with Satyaseelan, Sivakumaran and Varatharajaperumal. He is, however, now better known as the founder-leader and mentor of EPRLF - and another victim of LTTE's bloody pursuit for hegemony.

It was around 1975 that the Tamil New Tigers (TNT) emerged. It was also during this period that Prabhakaran's name begins to float around. **And on May 5, 1976 the LTTE was founded.**

So much for the LTTE propaganda that its origins dates back to 1972!

The author, in this Chapter, also lays bare the dilemma that the TULF was faced with during this period of "early militancy". This problematic is neatly summed-up in the following passage depicting the quandary that the late

Amirthalingam was in: "The government and the ruling party thought that the TULF leader was hand-in-glove with the 'boys', while the latter said bitterly that he had sold himself out to Colombo for the official perks lavished on him" (p. 44).

Chapter Four, the one with the shortest title, "**Prabhakaran**," is a fascinating study of not only Prabhakaran, but also the beginning of the aberrations which was to consume the Tamil militancy in an orgy of internecine conflicts.

The Chapter begins with Prabhakaran's childhood days - the fantasies of a Clint Eastwood and Subhash Chandra Bose molded into one. Although this aspect has been already written about and is common knowledge, the readers may not have been aware of the proto-warrior lurking inside the "child" in Prabhakaran:

Prabhakaran began preparing for the battles that he perceived lay ahead. He would tie himself up, get into a sack and lie under the sun the whole day. He would also go and spread himself on chilli bags. He even inserted pins into his nails. At other times, he would catch insects and prick them to death with needles to gain the mental preparation to torture the 'enemy'(p. 52).

As Prabhakaran grew older and joined the nascent Tamil militant tendencies, so did his self-perception that he was "history-in-the-making". And, this history was one day to take the Jaffna society back to the stone-age!

The internal rivalries within the LTTE, manifest in the bloody feud between Prabhakaran and Uma Maheswaran and their respective supporters were, in a way, the precursor to the internecine conflicts that were to bedevil the Tamil armed resistance. The early fratricidal killings, in the words of the author,

Shocked the Tamil community. Since the murder of Sundaram in January 1982, people had been speaking in whispers about "boys" killing "boys". That Uma and Prabhakaran had clashed in Madras was bad enough. But killing two Tamils in cold blood in Jaffna was a shocker. In 1982, Tamil society still had its soul; in a few years it would mostly look the other way when the LTTE brutally wiped out the TELO" (p. 81).

The author in his painstaking research, based mainly on empirical data collected through interviews, also at the opportune moment, falls back on secondary sources. And the following passage taken from the *Saturday Review*, which the author calls Jaffna's outspoken weekly, brings to light the seeds of disintegration which were planted even then: "The truth is that there is a new underground force in the making, an underground force without ideals, which if allowed unchecked could even bring about a state of civil strife in Jaffna and plunge the whole peninsula into chaos" (p. 81). Yes, indeed!

Chapter Five, "**Tamils Get Training**", begins with the gory details of the 1983 July holocaust, following the LTTE's ambush on convoy "Four Four Bravo" in Tinnevely, which "veritably altered Sri Lanka's history". As the author explains, "Tamil chauvinism would now do to the Sinhalese in the northeast, and wherever else possible, what the Sinhalese had done to the Tamils in July. The riots truly heralded Sri Lanka's ethnic conflagration" (p. 95)

And so the flood-gates were opened for training on Indian soil.

As an interlude, the author goes back in time to the period of fraternal relations between the Tamil Resistance and the Palestinian Resistance. But, what distinguished the Indian training from the Palestinian training was the large numbers who turned up for the former. The reason?

[T]he army of youths was not flocking to the Tamil groups only because of the racial holocaust they had witnessed or read about; they came in dozens because a strong rumour had begun to circulate in Tamil areas. India, the giant of South Asia which so many Sri Lankan Tamils considered their cultural motherland, was ready to accept, train and arm young Tamils willing to fight for Eelam. The rumours were soon confirmed by Tamil groups. That cleared the most serious apprehensions in the minds of many youths as to who would back them in their fight. Once that puzzle was considered solved, no Tamil group had to go in search of members"(p. 97).

The Chapter while citing some of the more daring exploits of the militant organizations, flushed with Indian training, also hints at another type of "militancy" preceding 1983- namely, political and mass mobilization based on contradictions **internal** to the Tamil social formation. These included struggles against caste oppression, suppression of women's rights and the exploitation of landless agricultural workers.

It is interesting here to pose the hypothetical question as regards the direction that the Tamil National Movement would have taken, if not for the emergence of narrow Tamil chauvinism, with fascistic tendencies, as the counter-foil to Sinhala chauvinism and State terrorism. Some of the answers surface in an interesting interview with an EPRLF activist who was engaged in political and mass mobilization around issues mentioned earlier. This particular activist makes the following cutting observation, which says it all: "But the massive rush to join Tamil groups (after the 1983 riots) destroyed our desire to train boys politically. When we insisted on the importance of politics and ideology, many of the new recruits threatened to leave us. Some actually left us" (pp. 105-106.)

The author, being an Indian, also poses some valid questions as regards India's own interests and her approach to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. These doubts are compressed in the concluding paragraph of Chapter 5 where the author ponders over the "dual track" policy being pursued by New Delhi. On the one hand, the stress was on a negotiated settlement in which the TULF was expected to take the

initiative. On the other hand, the "militants" were motivated through training and an implicit understanding that Eelam was inevitable. As the author puts it succinctly, "It was the beginning of India's double talk which finally brought despair to her Sri Lanka policy."

From the viewpoint of geo-political realities, it certainly would have been naive to assume that India would have backed the "secessionist" project in Sri Lanka. From India's own interests, it is clear that India's main concern was to exert pressure on Colombo to resolve the ethnic tangle in a manner that also addressed the "legitimate grievances and aspirations" of the Sri Lanka Tamils - and, in the process, immunize Tamil Nadu from "unhealthy" influences from across the border. But, it was easier said than done. The opportunism of Tamil Nadu politicians, who established a patron-client relationship with the various Tamil militant organizations, led to a situation where the "external sanctuary" became internalized, thereby creating unforeseen problems to, both, New Delhi and Colombo.

There can be no doubt that the Tamils of Sri Lanka desperately wanted an "Indian" involvement - and, if "Eelam" was handed over on a silver platter, well and good! But, "Eelam" to them was more a **symbol** of self-respect and dignity which was denied to them by successive Sri Lankan governments. "Eelam" also symbolized a political system that denoted substantial **autonomy** for them in the region constituting their traditional and historical habitat. It certainly cannot be assumed or taken for granted that the broad Tamil People saw "Tamil Eelam" purely in terms of **absolute sovereignty** that is possible only under conditions of secession - a scenario close to the heart of the LTTE Supremo. In particular, what the Tamil People did not envisage was the fragmentation of the Tamil Resistance and its degeneration into internecine warfare and fascistic tendencies. **In short, the "Tamil Eelam" project is no longer an anathema only to Colombo and New Delhi - it has also become a dead-weight for the Tamils of Sri Lanka .**

As Narayan Swamy reflects: "The Tamil militant campaign today is a pale shadow of the putsch of the early 1980s, although some of the key actors still remain. The LTTE, the only group still uncompromising on Eelam, has emerged over the years as a ruthlessly effective, high-tech group that has

turned assassinations into a finely honed art. It now evokes more fear and awe than adoration - a far cry from the time when its members, and those of other militant groups, were affectionately called by Tamils as *namma podiyangal* (our boys).

The elements of the problems mentioned above, including the "Tamil Nadu" tango, is depicted in Chapters 6-8. It relates, without much fuss, what exactly transpired. It may be seen "sensational" to many - but, I doubt that was the intention of the author. The fact is that the "truth", in many ways, is more sensational than the "fiction" that has been dished out to the general readership by other authors of similar "works"!

The last three chapters on the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, its fallout and the consequences are a less of a challenge. It is a topic that has received much attention from scholars and academics. What Narayan Swamy has done, however, is to provide the "inside story" as related and interpreted by the "actors". It is up to the academics and scholars to cull out what is essential for a theoretical construct based on empirical data.

Some academics may, in fact, criticize *Tigers of Lanka* for relying heavily on empiricism - with insufficient input on the normative and prescriptive aspects. To others, particularly the "actors" who were directly involved, the empirical components may actually be boring! I see *Tigers of Sri Lanka* as providing a vital component in the yet to be written history of Sri Lanka's bloody ethnic conflict - nothing less, nothing more.

As Narayan Swamy in all modesty and quite rightly mentions in the preface "this book does not purport to be the last word on the history of Tamil militancy. There can perhaps never be a "the" account of that bloody struggle, which incidentally shows no signs of ending".

One major flaw that I see in the book is the title itself. *Tigers of Sri Lanka* is definitely not just another book about the LTTE! This would be evident to those who have read it - or, have just finished reading this review!

Readers will find this book lucid, honest and revealing! And, that is what matters.