

Of Heroes and Villains: Dutugemunu and Prabhakaran

Ruben Thurairajah

History in Sri Lanka has never been allowed to rest as history. It is not a settled archive of facts but a living force, retold as myth and scripture, invoked as justification, sung as lament and praise. Each generation is asked not to remember their country as it is now, but as it was once purified, once betrayed, once fought over. In that troubled memory, two men stand as mirrors to one another: King Dutugemunu of Anuradhapura, lion of the Sinhala chronicles, and Velupillai Prabhakaran, tiger of the Tamil cause.

Separated by two thousand years, they nevertheless appear bound together, each shaping the island's imagination of war and destiny. One fought to unite, the other to divide, but both lived as though the island's future rested upon their own bodies, and both became symbols larger than their victories or defeats. To understand the paradox of Sri Lanka's present; the island's inability to move beyond its ethnic wounds; is to confront how Dutugemunu and Prabhakaran, hero and villain, saint and demon, continue to haunt its people.

Ascetics of war

The Mahavamsa, the 5th-century Buddhist chronicle, gives us Dutugemunu as a man possessed. Even as a young prince in the south of the island, he is restless, impatient with the small comforts of his father's palace. He scorns pleasure, living as if his very flesh were pledged to a mission: to march north, to overthrow the Tamil ruler Elara, and to unite the island under Sinhala and Buddhist sovereignty.

Prabhakaran, born in Valvettithurai, in the north of what was then Ceylon, in 1954, seemed cut from the same cloth. As a youth, he displayed the same single-minded devotion, but to a different end. He stripped life of distractions. He denied himself luxury, eschewed chemical highs, lived with the discipline of a soldier long before he commanded an army. Those who joined

his movement came to know him as an austere, almost monastic figure. He demanded from his cadres what he practiced himself: the erasure of the personal in the service of his mission.

Both men, then, were ascetics of war; figures who renounced the ordinary to become vessels of a singular project. In their self-abnegation, they acquired the aura of destiny.

Enemy as destiny

Dutugemunu's great adversary, Elara, a South Indian Chola Tamil prince, seized Anuradhapura and ruled justly for more than forty years. The chronicle praises Elara as fair and noble. Yet his nobility counted for nothing. For the Buddhist monk authors of the Mahavamsa, Elara's very presence in Anuradhapura was a violation, a sign that the cosmic order had been disturbed. He was an "other" who had to be expelled, not because he was unjust, but because he did not belong.

Prabhakaran constructed the same "other," but in reverse. For him, the Sinhala-dominated state was not simply oppressive but existentially alien. A Sinhala Buddhist war machine clothed in the language of the nation state denying Tamils their rightful place. The very presence of a Sinhala army in Jaffna, of Sinhala administrators in Tamil lands, was an usurpation of dignity.

In both visions, the adversary became the destiny: the one against whom the entire people must be mobilised. The campaigns of Dutugemunu and Prabhakaran were not territorial wars in the narrow sense. They were crusades against existence itself, against an "other" whose presence was intolerable.

Duel and embodiment

The story of Dutugemunu culminates in the duel. Mounted on his war elephant, he rode out to meet Elara before the walls of Anuradhapura. The clash of armies

was reduced to the clash of two men. The island's fate was compressed into their combat, into the victory of one body over another.

Prabhakaran, too, personalised the war. Though he commanded thousands, the Tamil struggle became synonymous with his own survival. For decades, his body; hidden in the jungles, emerging briefly in photographs and videos, was the battlefield itself. The state sought not simply to defeat the LTTE but to kill him, to extinguish the struggle by extinguishing the man. His death in the Nandikadal lagoon in May 2009 was staged as the ultimate duel: the body of the rebel captured, stripped of mystery, displayed as proof that the state had prevailed.

In both cases, war was not abstract. It was incarnated in the body of a single figure, whose life and death seemed to embody the destiny of a people.

Priests and consolations

On his deathbed, Dutugemunu was troubled. He had killed too many; his conscience was heavy. The Sangha soothed him: "Do not be troubled, O great king. None of those slain were true believers. Their lives were of no spiritual consequence." With this absolution, violence was transfigured into virtue. Dutugemunu became not a mere warrior but a saviour.

Prabhakaran's absolution came differently. There were no monks to sanctify him, but there were his believers, the poets, the mourners. In their songs and laments, his image was purified. He became not a failed leader but a martyr, a man who refused compromise, who carried his people's dream to the very end. Even in defeat, he was imagined as incorruptible.

In both cases, interpreters were needed to convert carnage into meaning, to assure the community that the killing was not sin but sacrifice. The priests, whether monks or mourners, completed the transformation of the warrior into the saint.

Legacy as prison

Dutugemunu's victory became the touchstone of Sinhala nationalism. From the time of the Kandyan kings during European colonialism through the speeches of modern politicians, to the naming of a Sri Lankan army regiment in 1962, he has been invoked as the archetype of the righteous conqueror. In moments of ethnic tension, he is recalled as proof that the Sinhala people have always prevailed, always restoring the island to its "true" order.

Prabhakaran's death, though officially cast as the end of terrorism, has not erased his presence. In Tamil homes in both Sri Lanka and abroad, in ceremonies in Jaffna, Toronto, London, Paris, and elsewhere he remains vivid. Songs are sung, murals painted, stories told to children. He represents both tragedy and pride.

Thus both men are imprisoned in memory, and their imprisonment extends to the island itself. Neither can be forgotten, and neither can be reconciled with the other. Dutugemunu and Prabhakaran become permanent archetypes: the Sinhala child taught to venerate one and abhor the other, the Tamil child taught to mourn one and fear the other. Each community carries its own warrior, its own martyr, as a badge of identity.

Irony of symmetry

The irony is stark. These two men, hailed as opposites, in truth mirror one another. Both renounced comfort. Both demanded total obedience. Both imagined the island's destiny as flowing through their veins. Both waged wars of annihilation. Both required others to sanctify their killings. Both became myths after death.

And both became, in the eyes of the other community, the incarnation of fear. To the Sinhalese, Prabhakaran is Dutugemunu's ancient enemy reborn, another Indian Elara to be vanquished. To the Tamils, Dutugemunu is Prabhakaran's eternal adversary, the first in a line of conquerors who claimed the island as exclusively theirs.

This symmetry reveals the trap: the two figures are not merely historical but archetypal, destined to be replayed endlessly in memory, each side haunted by the other's hero.

Country of shadows

In wounded societies, people live among shadows: of ancestors, of myths, of remembered injuries, of unhealed scars. Sri Lanka today lives in the shadows of Dutugemunu and Prabhakaran. The island proclaims reconciliation, speaks of development and tourism, of highways and investment zones, of digitalisation and artificial intelligence. Yet beneath the rhetoric is the duel, replayed in imagination: lion and tiger, each endlessly circling the other.

The irony is that Sri Lanka, which has endured centuries of conquest and colonisation, is now captive to its own mythic warriors. It cannot release them. It cannot allow Dutugemunu to fade into antiquity, nor Prabhakaran to remain a tragic memory. Instead, they are recycled in speeches, murals, songs, films. They

are invoked whenever their community feels insecure, whenever history seems on the verge of regurgitating itself.

The country thus becomes a land where history is not past but perpetual present, where the duel of king and rebel is never settled but rehearsed again and again, each side finding in the other's hero the proof of its own grievance.

Suspended future

Sri Lanka is trapped not simply by politics but by imagination. To break free would mean to see Dutugemunu and Prabhakaran not as archetypes but as men: products of their times, driven by ambitions and fears, neither saints nor demons. It would mean

learning to narrate the past without monks and without political myth-making, to accept that victory was costly, that defeat was tragic, that neither side was destined by gods or history to prevail or perish.

A more honest path forward would admit that neither Dutugemunu nor Prabhakaran can be anchors for a modern state. To move on would require a narrative that honours suffering without inheriting hatred. But the island still clings to its heroes, as though abandoning them would leave it unmoored. Thus, Sri Lanka stumbles, clouded in fables.

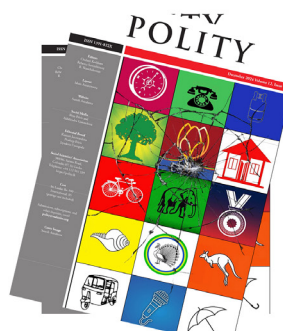
Ruben Thurairajah is a Yorkshire, England-based general practitioner; who also tweets <https://x.com/RubenThurairaj> and writes <https://drruben.substack.com/>.

Polity Issues

2023 - 2025



Volume 13 Issue 1



Volume 12, Issue 2



Volume 12, Issue 1



Volume 11, Issue 2