

The Tamil Liberation Struggle

1. The Struggle, its origins and misdirection:

The story of alienation and violence the Tamil community faced at the hands of the Sri Lankan state is well known. The tide of events leading from the disenfranchisement of the Tamil plantation labour in 1949, the sanction given to official discrimination in 1956, colonisation with a view to erasing the Tamil character of the North-East, state complicity in anti-Tamil violence from 1958, the attempt to deny and belittle the historical association of Tamil culture as an authentic ingredient in the melting pot of the island of Ceylon, to the republican constitution of 1972, left the Tamil speaking people in no doubt that they must fight for their selfrespect and dignity.

Many young and thoughtful Tamils of the 60s recognised that the task of liberation was much more than a fight against official Sinhalese chauvinism. The Tamil - speaking people themselves had diverse histories, social outlooks and interests. There was no question of Tamils living in the South, in the central hills and parts of the Eastern province isolating themselves from the Sinhalese. Discrimination in university admissions which came in 1971 and lasted through much of the 70s, was a problem high on the agenda for mainly middle class Jaffna Tamils. But for the bulk of the Tamils in the North-East whose living was related to agriculture, the main problem was to do with discrimination in infrastructural and job - creating investment. For the Tamil-speaking people in the East, the chief concern was the threat of violence brought ever nearer by ideologically - motivated colonisation of Sinhalese by the state. The Tamils in the hills were on the other hand most affected by the degrading conditions of the plantation regime. Then there was the problem of caste-a regional problem common to the Indian subcontinent. Jaffna society, in particular, made a pernicious distinction between the questionable categories of educated, semi-educated and uneducated. A youth falling behind in school faced alienation within the family circle itself, whatever his other attributes such as character and skill.

The problem of liberation was thus seen by many as a wider task dealing with several inter-related issues necessarily involving all the people in the island. Its international ramifications were also evident. The disenfranchisement of the Indian Tamils, which was given its final sanction by the Privy Council in Britain, was closely linked to the nature of British capital and the ruling interests in Ceylon. With the advent of the open market economy in 1977, land in the Sinhalese South was being given to multinational agribusinesses, while landless Sinhalese were sent to colonise the East after being fed on anti-Tamil sentiment. Moreover many of the structural problems concerning the nature of state power and accountability were common to the ordinary masses of Sinhalese, Muslims and Tamils alike.

From the 60s many able young men and women left school, gave up the prospect of university education and went into the villages to do political work, to mobilise the people and organise them against institutions such as caste. A number of student activists in the 70s made a special effort to understand the problems of peasants in the rural areas and to identify themselves with the problems of plantation Tamils.

In contrast to this line of perception, there was the one rooted in nationalism and the sentiments of the elite. This ignored all the complexities, and gave a very simple formula. It was supposed that the Tamils of Ceylon formed a special nation with a historical destiny. Their current woes were said to be the result of a loss of sovereignty through colonial

conquest and annexation to the Sinhalese kingdoms. The woes of the Tamils it was supposed would come to an end once Tamil Eelam regained its lost sovereignty, freeing itself from enslavement by the Sinhalese. We will not discuss the ideology itself, but would mention its effects. Apart from winning votes for the TULF which gave this ideology a mass appeal, almost every real challenge facing the Tamil people was wished away. While romanticised expectations were created, there was no move to mobilise people politically to tackle concrete issues such as colonisation, prepare the infrastructure for the difficulties of the struggle or even to come to terms with differences among the Tamil people. Any difficult question raised the answer : Wait till Tamil Eelam comes. To handle local criticism, it came naturally to brand anyone differing from this ideology a traitor of some sort. But an ideology which ignored the complexities could not provide real solutions. Indeed in high circles in Colombo and elsewhere it was frankly admitted that the notion of Tamil Eelam as a separate state was only a negotiating position.

After nearly twenty years of mounting tragedy, and a succession of leaders this hypocrisy remains to this day a dominant theme in Tamil politics, claiming lives by the thousands.

With the concrete issues ignored, the struggle was set to degenerate. As things developed, there came to be little of a sense of community. A social consensus about how people at different levels of society were going to live on the soil, build our social strength, cater for the needs of the younger generation and face mounting oppression from the state, never really emerged. Thus it was that young persons in professional courses in the university made speeches about the Tamil nation, staged dramas and went abroad after graduation. The elders casually said that these educated persons could come back to run the country and contribute to its development after those with the guns won freedom. The latter, they added, could of course become policemen and security guards. The hill-country Tamils who were displaced by the 1977 communal violence and were being settled in boarder areas were spoken of as a suitable buffer population. The inequalities of society remained intact.

A few individuals dedicatedly worked towards mobilising and organising the ordinary people in the late 70s and early 80s. Indeed students in the university and schools came forward on several notable occasions in protests as well as in relief work. But the new situation created by the 1983 anti-Tamil violence, and India's sponsorship of the rapidly growing militancy, brought to an end moves towards democratisation and autonomous civilian participation in the struggle. By the spring of 1985, the time of the revelations of internal killings in the PLOTE, and the Anuradhapura massacre, the dominant tendency in the militancy had become a mirror image of the Sri Lankan state.

It is notable that despite the anti-Sinhalese rhetoric that had been around for years, up to the time of the Anuradhapura massacre, all militant groups had maintained that the struggle was not against the Sinhalese. At least two major militant groups continued to maintain that they were fighting for a liberated socialist Sri Lanka, and despite internal degeneration of their organisations and mounting massacres of Tamil civilians by the Sri Lankan forces, the inhibition against killing Sinhalese civilians largely remained. This was a reflection of some of the healthier influences of the debates of the 70s that were being quickly scorched.

Internal killings within the PLOTE that were exposed by 'Theepori' dissidents in early 1985 and the public killing and burning of TELLO cadre by the LTTE in mid-1986 finally

shattered any semblance of moral integrity in the liberation struggle. That internal killings of dissidents on Indian soil were commonplace within the TELO and the LTTE was also known. This gave a chilling angle to the nature of Indian tutelage of militant groups, making nonsense of India's belated lamentations about gun culture in Tamil Nadu.

Having eliminated the other groups terror became the LTTE's main vehicle for dealing with civilians. Its legitimacy rested on the appeal of Tamil chauvinism and fear of the Sri Lankan army. Underlining its character there soon followed a massacre of EPRLF detainees in its Brown Road prison, reminiscent of the Welikade massacre in July 1983 of the government's Tamil detainees.

Thus did hundreds of young men who left their homes prepared to give their lives for the liberation of their people, die abjectly at the hands of others who were literally and sometimes physically their brothers. Families where sons by sheer accident joined different groups became divided. In this atmosphere of disillusionment many civilians who wanted to remain in the North-East and be part of the struggle began leaving to emigrate. To the normal wartime emigration of young men was also added those who felt alienated by the struggle. The community for which the struggle was begun was disintegrating.

A struggle which had not addressed the question of building a dynamic community on the soil as an integral part of the struggle was led to cynicism about ordinary people. The LTTE in particular began to view people as being useful in just three categories: as recruits to be used, as corpses from army massacres for propaganda or as emigrants to the west providing dollars. This dictated much of military strategy. Recent instances are: breaking of the truce in Valvettithurai by firing at an Indian army patrol on 2nd August 1989 and withdrawing, resulting in a civilian massacre; firing at an Indian army post from inside Mannar hospital; withdrawing into the jungles in the East in June 1990 after killing hundreds of Sinhalese and Muslim policemen who were taken prisoner; and shortly afterwards firing shells into the Jaffna Fort army camp after removing LTTE patients from the nearby Jaffna hospital but without warning civilian patients. One could add to this list indefinitely. A liberation group with the task of protecting civilians, was conspiring instead to have them killed for propaganda.

The decline in the material and social basis of the struggle and civilian morale, the resort to repression and murder within the community and the adoption of desperate and utterly unprincipled measures, were processes that went hand in hand. Innocent children with no understanding of history and knowing next to nothing of what the struggle was about were recruited through a manipulation of childish sensibilities. They were then brainwashed and trained to become killers and torturers of their own people. A struggle with no real strength had to sustain itself by stirring up the worst and destructive instincts among all those concerned. Its strength lay in making Tamil people insecure rather than secure. The military strategy referred to, and attacks on Muslim and Sinhalese civilians were part of this. Apart from Yogi's May-day speech in 1987, the Tamil people have been repeatedly told that lakhs of civilians must die in order that the LTTE's struggle would receive international recognition.

A struggle so essentially weak can have no enlighten ideals or goals. The group is thus forced into repeated shameful somersaults in order to preserve the power of its leadership and its local and overseas hangers-on. It was said by many thoughtful Tamils in the 70s that the Tamil struggle must be a part of the struggle of democratic forces in the whole island, must be conducted with a sense of responsibility towards other communities living in the island, and

that dubious alliances with foreign interests must be avoided. Moreover it was said that such alliances rather than strengthen the people would only manipulate them and ultimately render them powerless.

Between the LTTE and earlier nationalist politics, there was a difference of degree if not in quality. The TULF could live with a deal that gave the Tamil elite a share of power and secured for them a role within the establishment. Parliamentary politics could be handled by making the right noises from time to time. The LTTE on the other hand branded a substantial section of the Tamils as traitors, killed tortured and imprisoned its own people by the thousands, had sent children on suicide attacks and had inflicted enormous suffering on the civilians. By brutally alienating the Muslim population it had made its claims to rule over the North-East uncomfortably similar to the claim of Sinhalese chauvinists to the whole of Sri Lanka. Moreover its history of double-dealing and somersaults, and its performance as to whether what was eventually achieved could not have been realised without so much destruction could hardly bear scrutiny.

The LTTE could thus not afford any semblance of democratic freedom where ordinary people could speak out or ask questions. It felt naked without its repressive apparatus and was trapped into a culture of militarism. While Balasingam told the press (in English) in early 1990 that the LTTE would lay down its arms once the last Indian soldier left the island, it was preparing for the very opposite. When people thought that peace had come, the LTTE kept up its violent rhetoric and recruitment of children by stirring up their emotions. The embarrassing questions its propagandists were asked in schools made it feel very uncomfortable. All the while it was holding secret talks in Colombo. There was a very important and embarrassing demand that it could not voice publicly. This was that it should be given extraordinary powers to maintain armed control over the North-East, and to arrest, torture and kill without being answerable to any law. This is a new twist to the concept of self-determination. It was already holding around two thousand prisoners. It could not afford to have things otherwise. It is this that ultimately makes it impossible for the LTTE to openly put forward a clear and defensible negotiating position.

The war of June 1990 came without anyone understanding what had happened. Had there been a semblance of morality or justification in the Tamil position, people would have come forward spontaneously to offer material and other help to the war effort, as they had been prepared to do generously in the early days of the struggle. There was instead much cynicism. After the murder of hundreds of unarmed Muslim and Sinhalese policemen, the Tamil cause was at its lowest ebb. It was against this backdrop that Mahattaya LTTE's political chief declared that all goods and persons on the soil of Tamil Eelam are now the property of the liberation struggle. While poor and frightened people who had suffered enough were subject to such demands, these were not extended to the bank accounts of the LTTE's loyal supporters overseas. It took insensate massacres of thousands of Tamils by the Sri Lankan forces and hundreds of thousands of frightened refugees to bring some international sympathy to the Tamils.

2.Liberation and Human rights in the context of the Tamil struggle.

General:

The legal aspect of human rights as codified in the Universal Declaration of 1948 can be regarded as a consensus based on the historical experience of all peoples of the world. Immediately preceding this declaration there had been two world wars and several social upheavals that had brought out some of the worst tendencies in human nature. The declaration is far from being alien to us in our part of the world. It echoes the teachings of the great sages of India, including Thiruvalluvar. Apart from guaranteeing freedom from torture, arbitrary imprisonment and freedom of speech, the declaration also deals with social aspects of alienation. In short the declaration was saying that if we were to end the great human tragedies that we had been experiencing, and establish harmonious relations between human beings, there are certain rights of others which we must observe at all costs. Governments in particular were obliged to guarantee these rights to their citizens.

Most governments were cynical about such obligations and continue to be so. When it is convenient, clever arguments are put forward to the effect that such rights are idealistic. Nevertheless the declaration also provided an international framework to challenge and combat violations of human rights. This has had to a limited extent a powerful and benevolent influence. Where human rights were concerned, national sovereignty had increasingly ceased to exist. Any abuse in any part of the world is becoming the legitimate concern of everyone else. Still, economic disparity and the unequal relationship between countries allows much distortion, and human rights issues have been used selectively to further narrow interests by the powers which control the world today. It does not however invalidate the need for human rights activity, but only shows the obstacles the people, especially from the Third World, face in realising these rights. Abuse of human rights by governments can be utilised by the dominating powers to impose their own order on economic and social fronts which take away a large portion of hard won rights of the ordinary people in third world countries. In this cynical environment, to fight for human rights consistently there is a need for more coordination with a clear perspective between NGOs concerned. This is now taking shape at a conceptual level. It is only the beginning.

When the governments abuse human rights, the excuse most often given is that killing or torturing a few individuals is nothing in comparison with the security of the state which affects the mass of the people. Similar arguments are also advanced by intellectuals allied to powers that regularly abuse human rights. It used to be said by apologists for oppressive governments that repressing individuals was necessary in order to guarantee freedoms such as the right to work and the right to good health, education and housing for the mass of the people. The fallacy behind this is evident to us today because governments which systematically abuse human rights have either collapsed materially and politically or are in a deep state of crisis. Their internal corruption and deceit has also become exposed with time .

It is thus true that a struggle for human rights should be viewed in the broad sense. That is, to guarantee people a decent life including the rights of fair wages, education, housing and importantly freedom from fear. Those for whom religion does matter would also maintain the primacy of the spiritual realm. There is today a rising tendency to stress the importance of animal rights and the environment as concerns which impinge on the health and happiness of human beings themselves.

Yet when resort is made to imprison, silence, torture or to kill individuals for their beliefs or opinions, it signifies a malaise which threatens all other freedoms and the well being of society as a whole. Any society which finds it inconvenient to tolerate people who think differently and develop new ideas from the old, is shutting out human creativity and is bound to be an oppressive society in decline. This is why these individual freedoms have

become an area of specialised concern, involving some of the best known international organisations.

The context of the freedom struggle:

It is clear from the beginning of the previous section that a large section of our youth who in the 70s tried to come to terms with the complexities of the Tamil predicament, began a struggle which was for human rights in the broadest sense. This included a realisation that the masses of Sinhalese and Muslims were also oppressed by a system of debasing power relations, and that the struggle must be a common one.

Our freedom struggle was born in a context where the state resorted to increasing repression coupled to mounting human rights abuses. Most liberation struggles are born of such experiences, and thus there was a widespread expectation that liberation groups themselves would be more sensitive to human rights and would take greater pains to observe them. For this reason activist circles around the world, a significant section of the media and even some governments accorded a higher moral status to liberation groups than to the governments they were up against. Indeed this was the case with the Tamil struggle through much of the 80s. Thus when a liberation group used this trust and sympathy purely to gain power, while itself systematically abusing the rights of others, it falls upon us as Tamils to judge them very harshly. If we do not do this, we will not just be branded as frauds and liars and lose the sympathy of those concerned for us, But we will also destroy ourselves.

As we have mentioned, human rights do not originate in law books. Creative people who are sensitive to others will naturally work towards realising them. A section of the Tamil militants tried in the 80s to evolve democratic structures to deal with problems. In dealing with crime, internal indiscipline and social malpractice the emphasis was on correction rather than on causing bodily pain. In approaching political opponents they challenged their ideas and actions politically rather than shoot them. Some of these laudable earlier trends were drowned out by later tragic developments.

The attainment of human rights in the widest sense may be described as working towards a state of mind in the community that realises happiness in bringing out the best human potential in others and constantly seeks solutions to problems without recourse to violence. Such an attitude demands, humility, patience and constant self-examination. This encompasses all aspects of life.

Thus when confronted with ugly communal violence such as in 1983, an approach based on human rights consciousness would shun the egoistical and shallow approach of branding the Sinhalese barbarians and killers. But it would try to identify the institutional and political forces behind the violence and work systematically towards isolating them. This means ultimately bringing out the best in ourselves as well as the Sinhalese. Such a state of mind is truly liberating.

On the other hand if a struggle is based on believing the worst of others, and forgetting that we have an obligation towards those alongside whom history has placed us, we will only bring out the worst in them as well as ourselves. This is the lesson of our struggle. It is not an accident that a struggle which degenerated to the point of massacring Sinhalese and Muslim civilians has also taken to doing worse things to its own people. It has separated children from their mothers and turned them into torturers, sadists, killers and suicidal

machines. It seeks to turn ordinary people into liars, opportunists and informers. Eelam in short is to become the name of a notorious concentration camp, the very antithesis of liberation.

The UTHR(Jaffna):

The UTHR(Jaffna) was born in mid -1988 as part of the national UTHR, comprising academics from all universities. The South was witnessing the unprecedented violence and counter violence of the JVP uprising. In the North -East too competing militant factions had turned themselves into killer machines. Civilians were being picked off as targets either for power, out of fear, simply to mark attendance or due to a mixture of all three. Although people asked for reasons why someone in the neighbourhood was killed, answers were hard to come by. If they found a reason, it was often to assure themselves that they were safe. If not the experience became more terrifying.

Moreover events had shown that where capacity for evil was concerned, Tamils and Sinhalese were much the same. It gave us an opportunity to re-evaluate the past and work towards a better future. Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, one of our leading activists, was the embodiment of human-rights consciousness in the widest sense. She had known the degeneration of the militant struggle from within. She believed passionately that every human life snuffed out in vain should be accounted for and the perpetrators challenged. We also believed that we must face the truth about ourselves, and one aspect of our work was to record violations whether they were caused by the IPKF, the Sri Lankan forces or one of our militant groups. In doing this we broke new ground. The credibility we gained around the world was immediate.

The peculiar situation then during the IPKF presence gave the university a certain legitimacy in representing the grievances of ordinary people and students. Rajani recognised that the situation was volatile and risky, and that any leverage we earned by exposing violations should be used to strengthen the people. A strong people, she rightly believed was the ultimate bedrock of a sane and just society. Thus the exposure of human rights violations, to be sustainable and meaningful, had to be married to political work. While arguing for the rights of students who sympathised with the LTTE and securing their safety or release when taken in by the Indian army , she also spent hours pleading with the students. She told them that a liberation group must strengthen values of mutual trust, openness and friendship, both in the community and in the university, rather than make them spy on their fellows, endanger or terrorise them and ultimately simply use the trust and goodwill of others in a cynical power game. She was deeply grieved by the degeneration of human values in the struggle and well understood the danger in which she was placing herself. She was also in the forefront of caring for distraught women and asserting their dignity.

From the middle of 1989 the situation changed rapidly. With the LTTE-Premadasa deal the stakes became high. Once the IPKF and their allies began forced conscription for the TNA, their attitude became nastier. Killing and counter killings increased sharply. Rajani was shot dead by an assassin while returning from work on 21st September 1989 - the day after the IPKF's withdrawal was announced. Her dedication as a medical teacher and community worker could not be tolerated by the order that was coming. Although the circumstances of her murder were carefully chosen to cast suspicion on the IPKF, the affiliations of the killers became known very quickly. It became clear from the actions of some individuals who had

earlier sought her sympathy that treachery was to become the foundation of the new liberated order.

The LTTE took 60 days to deny having murdered her. This it did on the day prominent international delegates arrived in Jaffna to commemorate her life and work. But from the day she died a well-oiled Tamil expatriate network began a campaign character assassination in a bid to justify the murder.

The UTHR(Jaffna) in historical perspective:

Despite all the tragedies that have befallen the community from September 1989, the UTHR(Jaffna) not merely survives, but lives on. It remains a voice both exposing and explaining the violations in the North - East and the politics of destruction the combatants find themselves locked in. The UTHR(Jaffna) performs its functions despite having suffered a number of setbacks beginning with Rajani's murder. Thanks to the public and international response to the murder, we were able to maintain an open presence in Jaffna for another year. An incident which followed the increasing repression which begun with the war of June 1990 compelled us to shift our base both in location as well as in active participants away from the University of Jaffna. Furthermore the national UTHR became defunct because it was unable to achieve the internal stability to match the terror from the government as well as the JVP. But colleagues from the Southern UTHR continued to help us privately.

The key reason for our survival was because we are firmly rooted in some of the best and enduring traditions of the Tamil struggle and not because of the heroism of individuals. We as Tamil people have had a tradition of political activism and sacrifice in the face of state and social oppression going back beyond the 70s. This has been referred to in the earlier sections. Many of those who were part of the early awakening subsequently experienced isolation, frustration and even worse with the tragic turn of events. They remain an enormous untapped resource for the ultimate liberation of our people, and are to be found in all walks of life. Particularly after Rajani's murder and the challenge it posed to the people as whole, the UTHR(Jaffna) could not have survived without the solidarity it received from this quarter, from unknown individuals.

Rajani was one among many who came in this tradition of activism, sacrifice and intellectual searching. Like many others, having discovered that she had once given her support to power crazed individuals who were destroying the community in the name of liberation, she turned her grief into a fresh spring of energy, determined to save at any cost to herself, those who would destroy themselves and the community. Her own experience was not unlike those of many young men, women and student leaders. The new and ugly face of the struggle produced in the 80s a line of student leaders and activists in the University of Jaffna whose fates were in keeping with the larger tragedy. To some death came as a welcome relief. Some committed suicide, and some narrowly escaped into exile. Some like Vimalaswaran and Rajani who openly defied the forces of destruction were murdered. Several others at this very moment face degradation and torture in the LTTE's bunker prisons. These persons who feel the tragic weight of history are tortured and humiliated by evilly manipulated children who know nothing of the rich and variegated history of the Tamil struggle.

The UTHR(Jaffna) thus represents a continuing tradition. We believe that the renewal of our society necessarily involves doing historical justice to the memory of those

who were denied the opportunity to give their full potential to the well - being of our society and whose lives were tragically snatched away. This is what Rajani and many others now dead would have wished. Among the tens of thousands who died many were massacred by mindless state forces, and of many others, some were made to die to feed propaganda mills, some died for being true to their conscience , some as warriors cast as either martyr or traitor as accident would have it, and many children died snatched from their mothers and turned into walking grenades.

The UTHR (Jaffna) lives on as one of the voices of a spirit that cannot be destroyed. Even with our community subject to unprecedented terror, and thousands being imprisoned in a bid to stamp out this spirit, its voice can be heard because its roots are too deep. Many still risk their lives producing underground leaflets to inform the world of what the rulers would like to conceal. These reports are frequently quoted in numerous overseas Tamil publications.

In view of what is owed to so many others as well as to continue our functions effectively, we have avoided promoting individuals. While we have no formal organisation, we are happy to regard anyone who shares our aims and our work as one of us.

The future of the Tamils and the importance of human rights

What initially brought much international sympathy for the Tamil struggle was the callousness of the Sri Lankan state motivated by Sinhalese chauvinism, particularly from July 1983. The number of Tamils killed up to the coming of the IPKF in 1987 is placed at above 20,000. Well over 10,000 Tamils have been killed since then, first by the IPKF and subsequently by the Sri Lankan forces. The numerous massacres by the Sri Lankan forces since June 1990 would suggest that the Sri Lankan state had learnt few lessons despite the tragedies and humiliations the Sinhalese themselves have suffered as the direct consequence of this ideology. The JVP uprising cost over 40,000 Sinhalese lives.

Against the failures of the Sri Lankan state, to many the chauvinism of the dominant Tamil political tendency appears excusable. Although Tamils in general have strong reservations about the LTTE, there is also confusion. It is wondered what the Sri Lankan state would do to the Tamils if the LTTE collapses. In order to resolve this dilemma we must ask ourselves some important questions and look at the facts squarely.

Firstly, is it sane for us to continue to support narrow nationalistic ideologies that have resulted in so much internal destruction to both the Tamils and the Sinhalese? Secondly, can the kind of destruction brought about by a politics that has made a large section of conscientious youth "traitors" by definition, which has killed, tortured or frustrated so many who combined intelligence with a social conscience, and which urges our children to become sadists and suicide machines, take us anywhere near liberation? In the appendix we give a report on Liberia where children were similarly used. Unless we call a halt to this, the future is too depressing to contemplate.

Some may reply to this by saying that in a situation where the position of the Tamils facing a brutal government is so desperate, liberation, morals and democracy have become non-issues. The only thing that matters is survival. Furthermore it is often maintained that only a group as strong and ruthless as the Tigers can bring this about.

This position which is commonly subscribed to by the elite who have already found some ways to ensure their own survival, is intellectually faulty besides being cynical about ordinary people. Need a struggle that is strong be so fearful of even a modicum of truth as to torture and kill in order to suppress any voicing of true and honest opinion? It has further weakened the people to a point where everyone is forced to play the role of a stooge, a liar and a hypocrite. Finally, when the inevitable happens, the people are left unprotected as repeatedly witnessed.

Further, has the LTTE really strengthened the position of the Tamils? One part of the problem is the government's inability to put forward a negotiating position. What is perhaps worse is, as we have explained, that by our politics the LTTE and the Tamils are trapped into not being able to themselves put forward a position. For its own survival the LTTE must demand uninhibited armed control over the North-East with powers to arrest, torture and kill. This cannot be respectably voiced in any international forum. Also, by continuing brutally to alienate the Muslims, it would be cynical to think that the LTTE could ever exercise legitimate power in the North- East. We know what it cost the unity and sovereignty of Sri Lanka to treat the Tamils in the manner in which it has been done. Do we understand what it has cost us to treat the Muslims as we did?

In short, to support this politics is only to sustain our vain illusions by the blood sacrifice of other people's children -especially poor, rural children.

Let us, on the other hand, look at some positive gains brought about by years of human rights pressure due to both international and local effort. The Biafran war in Nigeria which began in 1967 dragged on for nearly three years. The Federal government won the war in a matter of months by halting relief supplies of food to Biafran civilian. Biafra lost the war with a large number of civilians dying of starvation. In Sri Lanka today, some sections in the South have advocated starving the civilian population in Jaffna; but thanks to both international pressure and sober opinion in the South, such an outcome has become unthinkable. Food rations to Jaffna have kept moving. This does not happen because our struggle has gone from strength to strength. The government does have the capacity to win in purely military terms by starving the Tamils and turning the North-East into a desert. It is thanks to the internationalisation of human rights that a semblance of civil society continues to survive in the North- East.

The oppression of the Sri Lankan government and its propensity for brutality must be challenged and brought to an end. The internationalisation of human rights gives us the means do this creatively without tearing ourselves and others apart. How much our society has been torn apart can be seen from the glorification of suicide. There were times in history when women, to avoid being raped, used to commit suicide when their city was on the verge of falling to the enemy. It was a counsel of despair and not of victory. Is sending masses of children on suicidal charges and glorifying it a counsel of victory? For social reasons Jaffna has for decades had an unusually high suicide rate. But now suicide among civilians alone is unprecedented. Over a period of one month during 1991 Jaffna hospital recorded 60 suicides. How many go unrecorded in not known. Although this does not represent the full picture, it is an indication of the level of social despair. 60 is of the order of the casualty figure in some of the sensational massacres by state forces. But this regular internal massacre passes unnoticed. This level of despair was not present when refugees streamed into Jaffna following the

harrowing communal violence of July 1983. There was then a community, a unity of purpose and a feeling that we could fight back. The present state of suicidal despair which produces child recruits, is a product of a politics that has solely exploited the darker instincts of the Jaffna man.

As some might charge, we are not posing these questions to weaken the struggle, but to strengthen it. Honesty and openness can never weaken a people as opposed to a political culture of treachery and lies. These are survival questions we must ask ourselves as Tamils, as no one else can destroy us so completely as ourselves.

Similarly there are questions Sinhalese must ask themselves about the criminal policies pursued by those who acted in their name. We have everything to gain by the Sinhalese becoming a just and fairminded people rather than a small, frightened and directionless people.

As we have tried to demonstrate, the internationalisation of human rights gives us a powerful and creative means of realising the ideals of a liberated people. We need not destroy ourselves. Thanks to much human rights work done over two decades by many people, the situation in our country looks more promising than it does in many unfortunate parts of the world. If we could make ourselves a people trusted, open and responsible, we would have gone a long way towards realising our goals.

[The above was an extract of a booklet published by the UTHR(Jaffna) in Tamil march 1993]