

# Information Bulletin No.5

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## Women Prisoners of the LTTE

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### 1.Introduction:

In our reports [5](#) to [10](#) we have documented a good deal of information about prisoners of the LTTE and the ideological background to their cruel and degrading treatment. There arose in this connection some general questions about the social outlook of the LTTE, its attitudes to people in general, its own cadre and towards dissent. Far from creating a liberated polity where the people and the cadre have a broad and generous outlook, thus improving the tone of life, the LTTE's regime had done the very opposite. Everyone was judged merely by the 'use value' for those in power. The cadre involved in carrying out torture looked upon the prisoners exactly in the same way the leaders regarded them. The nobler aspects of a person's character, commitment-such as of those in other militant groups who had joined with a willingness to die for their people, individuality and sacrifice for a cause, all meant nothing. The elaborateness of this machinery with its network of prisons and torture camps frequently using children as torturers, the piling up of heaps of personal information which its bureaucracy would be hard put to cope with, gives a picture of the lowest depths of humanity. Yet this cause is not lacking in influential apologists from around the world. Its attitude to women could hardly be other than governed by its general social outlook. The apologists for this cause have picked on the presence of a large number of armed women in the movement to project a liberating image. Two women widely recognized for their social concern were among the LTTE's prominent victims. Chelvi Thiagarajah, a prominent woman political prisoner of the LTTE has earned two international literary awards while in prison. Dr. Rajani Thiraganama, murdered by the LTTE in 1989, wrote the following words ('The Broken Palmyrah' p 327-328):

*"...Because our society is hierarchically organised and seeped in the ideology of male dominance, the woman's position is thereby shaped in every aspect- personal relationships, property exchanges, work practices, and social and cultural norms- by a girdle of patriarchy. If in a society like this, the dominant ideology under which the struggle is organised is itself even more narrow, revivalistic and romantic one, well sprinkled with images of male heroes and male valour, and if nationalism is a type of aggressive patriotism,*

*then a concept of women's liberation would be working against the inner core of such a struggle.*

*“In such a situation, a call to arms for women had been based on images of mythified “brave and valiant mothers” who justified such male pride and went for wars or sent their sons, lovers and husbands to the war front. Therefore the armed women's sections developed either in terms of “use” as in the case of the LTTE or in a mechanical fashion, as a graft of an idea borrowed from other liberation struggles as with the EPRLF. Thus the passive stand by the LTTE women can be understood as the movement approved of them exactly as their society did....”*

That is to say, genuine women's liberation could not co-exist with the ideology and practice of the LTTE. The place of the woman in the organization was to be the ideal minion in the shadow of the Leader. Women had to discard their life-giving vitality and take on the livery of death. This was before the existence of women prisoners was generally known. The harshness shown by women LTTE cadre to fellow women who are prisoners, strikes one as not just trying to imitate the men cadre, but even to out-do them - at least in the use of language with a sadistic twist.

We must also mention that the main events recorded here are more than 3 years old. For reasons well known information is slow in coming out. Yet this paucity is also the very reason why these events must be placed on record. The record is far from being history. The LTTE remains a going concern and its political practice has not changed. The plight of women prisoners today, whether they be few or many, would be no less a cause for concern.

One also needs to ask: What does it mean for Tamil society, for its political regime enjoying considerable legitimacy to have built up a machinery not just to manacle and torture dissidents in dark hidden cells-but also their mothers, sisters and wives, several of whom are also grand mothers? [\[Top\]](#)

## **2.Location & number**

A large women's prison camp was located in the house of Ambihaipalan, a well-to do TULF politician & lawyer, now in Australia. The house was large with several rooms. A small room held about 25 persons. Several bunkers had also been constructed. In March 1990, the women prisoners opined that it was holding about 500. Conservatively we may place the number at 200. Prisoners who were brought back to the camp 3 or 4 months later said that there had been a turn over. This does not appear to be a camp where prisoners were held for several months.

In this camp women were woken up at odd hours by beating, taken to bunkers and interrogated. Shots were fired outside and the victim was told that she would be next. Women destined for an intensive course of torture were then transferred to smaller camps, often in Thenmaratchi. One in a coconut estate took in about 50 at a time. Here the sadism was more intense from the very beginning. The treatment could go on for several months.

There are other camps at which women prisoners were held. One is the Kopay women's camp. We could take it that several hundred women had been taken in and tortured. Many of them were eventually released. There are also known cases, eg. Chelvi Thiagarajah, who were not released. Prisoners said that some badly tortured detainees were 'dumped'. [\[Top\]](#)

## **3.The prison wardens**

The Mattuvil camp was headed by Eva, a woman of 50. The torturers were from mere 14 year old girls, going upwards. Sometimes ten were required at a time to beat a prisoner with sticks.

The intensity was said to increase with age. Eva also appears to have been in charge of some of the smaller camps. Some of those encountered in a smaller camp are Ashanthi, Ahali, Ananthi, Mohana, Vairavi and Mathangi. All had their peculiarities, but were hardly distinguishable in intensity of cruelty. Ahali for example used to beat women till they bled and made them stand in the sun until they begged for water. Then a cup of water meant for toilet use was placed in front and Ahali would taunt prisoner, holding her stick ready to beat and waiting for the prisoner to touch the cup. Sometimes she would kick them with her boots, throw them on the floor and trample them. Often the eyes of prisoners were tied. When it was time for undoing the blinds, Mathangi would greet the prisoner by hitting her on the head. Sometimes LTTE men would come to the camp in vehicles. Then the prisoners would be locked up early, and a raucous party could be heard. In the morning there would be jokes like, 'Mathagi, have you bought a Morris Minor?' in reference to the vehicle in which she had spent the night. The prisoners would be asked in a mocking tone, 'Did you hear us talking like the EPRLF?' They would then be asked to repeat that they saw only women in the camp.

Salim, prior to his sudden demotion in August 1991, apparently in a putsch against Mahattaya's men, was a regular male visitor to the camp. His language of address to the prisoners is said to have been uniformly foul in a manner most offensive to women. Women prisoners, old and young alike, found these filthy taunts most painful, something they cannot get over for several years.

Any hint of kindness was accidental and to do with some previous link or kinship between the prisoner and the warden.

At the Kopay women's camp, a prisoner went beseechingly to the chief. The latter stood up, and kicked out at the prisoner with her booted foot. The prisoner flew back and fell against the wall. [\[Top\]](#)

#### **4. A prisoner's experience**

We give below the experience of Pavamma (53) of Mattuvil South, Chavakacheri who was arrested in Jaffna town, mid-March 1990. The LTTE had then been in control of the area for two months after the IPKF pull-out. Pavamma had 3 sons -Kunarsa (born 1958) Thiagarajah (now in India, still with the EPRLF) and the last son Pavalarasa. Her husband died in 1977. From 1982-84 she had worked in Abu Dhabi. During her absence, her eldest son who had passed his O/L's and was unemployed joined the EPRLF. He soon left the EPRLF but maintained contact. Thiagarajah joined the EPRLF and stayed on. Pavalarasa too had joined the group and left it to work as a mechanic in Jaffna town, and in 1990 was planning to go abroad. In 1989 Kunarsa was in Colombo to go abroad when he was arrested and taken North by the LTTE, then fully in league with the government forces. Pavamma was arrested when she went to meet her mechanic son Pavalarasa in Jaffna town to ask money for her expenses. This son too, who was waiting to go abroad, was detained. We give below the main points of her experience.

She was arrested by women Tigers in a van who had come with one Iyathurai, driver, who knew her. Taken to Nallur women's camp, eyes tied, made to lie on floor, driven to the main women's prison camp in Mattuvil. Led to room alone, blind removed. Five women Tigers questioned her about her circumstances. They do not appear to have had any prior briefing about her. When she spoke about the purpose of her visit to town, they asked if she had come to give her son a tip off to leave the place. Then locked alone in room. Another group came & questioned, removed her jewellery and money. Asked about her jewellery, she said that they were a gift from her parents as was the Tamil custom. [LTTE propaganda maintained that families of their adversaries kept stolen property.] The torture then commenced with

beating by 5 women wielding sticks, led by 'Eva the Terror'. This went on till mid-night. She was then manacled and locked, and kept in a room having 25 prisoners.

Throughout her detention questions asked were along the same stereotyped lines. Her answers were used to make hypothetical allegations. No particular end or intelligent purpose was discernible. The general thrust of accusations was: Maintained contact with sons; Helped them with tip offs to escape; Knew location of arms cache; Kept money for eldest son 'Alex' who is alleged to have managed finances in the group; cooked for son in EPRLF at the back of hotel Ashok (one time EPRLF camp); Gave food to the EPRLF; Gave food to the IPKF; Gave drinks to the IPKF and so on.

Third day, brought out, encumbrances removed & asked to bathe off water in a drum under observation. Taken to a bunker and beaten. Shots heard outside. Interrogators said, 'You will be next'. The prisoner replied that she had in her time fed all militant groups including the LTTE, adding, 'Shoot me if you wish'. Eva called Ashanthi and asked her to get the truth out of the prisoner. Beating recommenced with severity. This went on for 3 days- brought to bunker each day, beaten and sent back. After 15 days several of the prisoners were blindfolded, manacled, and asked to walk holding the person in front. They were loaded into a van, driven, then asked to disembark and walk likewise over terrain where it was difficult to keep a steady pace blindfolded. Eva was leading the line. If one slipped and the line broke, all those behind were beaten on the head. When they reached the destination the prisoners were asked to get down and pass under barbed wire. Those whose dresses were caught were not allowed to stop, but rather made to tear their dresses, leaving bits of them sticking on barbed wire. They were marched into a very low roofed building, many of the prisoners knocking their heads. They were asked to sit and pushed down.

Early the following morning their blinds were removed and manacles taken off their hands. They were however kept fettered and locked. Ashanthi came and told them with obvious sarcasm that they would all be released after a big party that night and ordered the prisoners to bathe. There were about 50 prisoners in all, the premises being in a coconut estate with a small foot path leading to it. A lunch of rice with brinjals (aubergines) was their first meal for the day. The promise of a party was repeated several times with relish.

At 7.00 p.m the prisoners were tied, manacled and led into a dark room. The party commenced with Eva leading the beating and asking others to fetch sticks and join her. Those beaten included grand mothers and middle aged mothers of several children.

In the days which followed the torture continued. While some were beaten, some were hung from pulleys, and others bleeding from the beating were made to stand in the sun without water. The latter were occasionally for an interval taken to a shade and questioned. The same questions and allegations went on being repeated with mechanical regularity. One day the prisoner was beaten till she bled, and was then made to stand in the sun. Feeling weak, racked with pain and hardly able to speak, she asked for water. A cup of water for toilet use was placed in front of the elderly lady and Ahali stood with a raised stick. Eva glared at her and bellowed, "How many Indian soldiers did you talk to? How many from the EPRLF? They said you are a good lady who fed them. Tell us the truth"! At mid-night she was taken back to the room & others were warned: "Anyone giving her water will be severely punished". Next morning Ahali took her out and made her stand. As the sun rose she fainted. The same allegations were thrown at her and she was beaten while ordered to tell the truth. When she tried to speak, no noise came out. She was latter taken to the room.

Again the fellow prisoners were threatened not to give her water. This was the second time she was treated in this manner. Earlier she had been made to go without food or water for 3 days. One day Puppy, who under torture had confessed to having a brother in the EPRLF, had given her water by stealth at tremendous risk. The next morning the prisoner was given plain tea and lunch at noon, and was not tortured on that day. The next morning Eva said menacingly, "So you have recovered your voice?". She was first questioned under a jak tree and then taken to the hanging room. There she was beaten, thrown on the ground and trampled with booted feet. She broke a tooth and began to bleed. After she was made to fetch water and wash the blood off the floor, Ashanthi told her, "Now you are going to die. Out with the truth!". Her hands were then placed flat on the table, palms down, and the bony part was hammered with a stiff object. She was left in the dark room to decide whether she wished to confess her guilt. No water was given. The next morning Eva asked, 'Have you decided to talk?' The lady replied that she had said everything. Eva told her that the order from the top was to find out the truth and release her. Ahali interrogated her three days later and threatened to shoot her. No further interrogations took place. Then Salim came there and apparently dissatisfied said that the prisoner should be beaten and that he would do so personally. Mohana read to Salim an alleged confession of the prisoner. Two days later melted wax was poured on her hands. Then a video was taken of the prisoner reading a prepared confession which included things which she had never said-such as her feeding the IPKF. She was then used for manual labour-such as building bunkers. One day after the war resumed (11th June) an airforce helicopter circled overhead. The Prisoners were then sent back to the Mattuvil camp, where they were once more in fetters. About this time the prisoner contracted diarrhoea. Shortly afterwards Eva was replaced by Sutha who happened to be a daughter of her mother's classmate Parameswary Rajaratnam. She ordered that the prisoner be spared further beating. She also told Pavamma that should she need anything she ought to ask her personally. Her diarrhoea was treated with milk- coffee.

Early in August, Sutha asked 5 prisoners to stand up and said they were being released. From morning until 12.00 noon, the wardens laboured to open the locks of the fetters. The keys at first would not work. Then beating the locks and pouring kerosene were tried until they finally succeeded. After 3 weeks of labour in another camp, the prisoner was dropped off at Muthiraisanthai, Nallur. She wore the same saree she had worn throughout which was now tattered, torn & shrunken-barely reaching down to the knees. Only her chain was returned. Her cash (Rs 54,000/=) and ring were not returned, her captors claiming that they were stolen property. [\[Top\]](#)

### **Postscript:**

Upon release the prisoner was warned not to talk about her experience. Her house had in the meantime been taken over by the LTTE. She could never have obtained a visa to leave the North. Being an exceptionally strong woman, She had crossed the border into the South during 1992 with help using an irregular route. It is also remarkable that she has now found refuge among Muslims from Chavakacheri, who were themselves expropriated and deported by the LTTE in October 1990. A community of them now live south of Vavuniya. The lady said that they are extremely kind to her and take great pains over her welfare. If she went somewhere and got late, someone would come on a bicycle to see that she got home safely. On an occasion when she was worshipping at a temple in Vavuniya, she met a known man from Mattuvil who gave news of her eldest and youngest (mechanic) sons. This the man had gathered from a prisoner held by the LTTE and later released. The elder who was detained in Colombo had been taken to Thunukkai, given the usual treatment, blind folded, fettered and

kept in a bunker with 300 others for three months. It was said that he would be released. The mechanic son was said to be in a camp. His skill was probably put to good use. The mother is yet to hear from either of them.

Given the exceptional nature of the LTTE, she blamed the EPRLF for leaving their families behind and withdrawing with the IPKF. She finally said, "I have only given you a small part of my experience. There are things heard, seen and experienced which no self-respecting woman can bear to repeat, and moreover under no circumstances should any woman be exposed to such things." [This was evident in that, in answering questions her modesty deterred her from dwelling on matters touching upon normal social inhibitions. Aspects of the behaviour of the captors were matters she was reluctant to talk about]. She added, "This experience constantly gives me great pain. I cannot believe that it happened to me, an ordinary housewife and mother. I keep wondering if it were all a dream". [\[Top\]](#)

## **Some other Prisoners**

The following are a sample of women sometime imprisoned by the LTTE:

**Malini, Manipay, wife of Sri, EPRLF.** Head injury during arrest, mentally unbalanced. Tortured to disclose location of arms allegedly hidden by Sri which she did not know. Pricked with pins, unable to walk.

**Girl From Thavady.** Arrested because elder brother friendly with EPRLF. Went through usual tortures. Hit on the back using objects with spikes sticking out. Blood flowed. Later released.

**Girl arrested** in Kalmunai market early 1990, eldest of 5 girls.

**Father, a farmer in Batticaloa District,** used to drink and scold the LTTE and was later shot dead by them. The girl was taken by men who kept her 10 days in a jungle camp and then two months in a bigger camp, and then sent her to Jaffna Peninsula. She confided to some of the trusted prisoners that she had been abused. For this reason the chances of her release were believed to be slim.

**Girl working in video shop** at Jaffna Bazaar, where during the IPKF presence the EPRLF used to borrow cassettes. Tortured, vomiting continuously. Small electrical egg beater held in ears for two minutes. Huge metal ball tied to foot.

**Victor Anna Mary (50),** Grand mother, accused of going to an IPKF camp. Tortured severely and tied to a pulley and hanged upside down and immersed in water.

**Killi of Kottady, Jaffna,** Mother of 2 girls & 3 boys. Husband was a bus driver, used to drink, killed by IPKF. Killi's elder sister's son who used to come home was in the EPRLF.

**Ariyamalar,** Kantharmadam, owner of a tea boutique, two daughters Shanthi and Sutha about 20 years. Sought EPRLF intervention in a dispute during IPKF presence. Accused of talking to Thomas, EPRLF. Badly tortured.

**Nurse, Jaffna Hospital,** with daughter & 1 year old son. Daughter first brought to prison with mother, March 1990, and later given to husband, Nadarajah. Reason for arrest, brother in EPRLF. The torturers claimed that her TV, deck and other electrical items were EPRLF property & removed them from her home. Torturers used to trample her with booted feet and hit her against the wall. Later released.

**Elderly teacher from Uduvil,** had married an Indian, whose brother later arrived with the IPKF. From a Middle class background during and early days of detention assumed that captors will be lenient to her. But later underwent the same experiences as others.

Also arrested and tortured were **Jeyanthini, Murukandy** temple Mudaliyar's daughter, who was married to Kerdi, ENDLF & **Puppy** from Myliddy, EPRLF leader Sharma's wife. Both

arrested on way to India.

When prisoners were released, a good part of their property, eg. cash and jewellery, was confiscated by the jailors alleging that they were stolen property. [\[Top\]](#)

### **Concluding note**

Although there must be hundreds of women who have undergone such experiences, the paucity of information is not to be wondered at. The large scale torture of male civilians had commenced during 1989, even before the IPKF pull-out. By about May 1990 Amnesty had issued a statement on the matter. Information by comparison had been relatively plentiful until around early 1993. But in the case of women things work differently. The symbolism of this whole experience is very painful to women- something akin to repeated rape. After being broken in such a manner the woman is let loose, with barely a home and barely more than the tattered remnants of clothing she wore some months ago. Because of the pervading terror, the solace of social contact and the solace of institutionalised religion are almost closed to her. There is moreover the anxiety of not knowing what became of her husband, sons or brothers who were themselves detained. The threatening injunction not to talk about her experience is often superfluous. Moreover, prevented from leaving the North by a draconian pass system, the entire weight of propaganda is such as to crush any but the strong- her son was according to the propaganda a traitor, her husband or brother a traitor, and she herself bearing the stigma of a traitor. Some are even driven to seek an expiation of their alleged guilt by being useful to the LTTE!

What about the women LTTE cadre who torment their fellow women? The tasks assigned to them are reflective of some of the worst forms of female servitude attributed to traditional society. There is nothing remotely liberating in their activity except that of taking out all their accumulated frustrations on other women. There is nothing of the consultation, dialogue and debate that go on within other well- known liberation struggles. There is no sisterhood. The tasks assigned are themselves utterly demeaning of intelligence. The top leadership wants them to find out the truth from a particular woman about whom little is known- except that she was the mother, wife, sister or aunt of someone in another group with a different political and social philosophy. One could hardly expect the conduct of such relationships and the tender feelings accompanying them to have been other than what they normally are. The only discretion these female interrogators are allowed is to decide on the extent of torment within certain limits. In carrying out a stupid order, stupid questions are asked. Files, videos and perhaps computers are stuffed with a plethora of information, which is neither reliable nor useful in any political or military sense. Perhaps the main reason why the movement goes through such exercises is a burning sense of insecurity, a constant gnawing fear that its past will soon catch up.