

# **A Murder & the Problem of Truth:**

## **The Suffocation of Truth and its Political Implications.**

**By Rajan Hoole**

### **The October 1995 Exodus**

The most traumatising of attempts to cover the truth concerns the LTTE's forced exodus of the civilian population in Valikamam on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1995. The LTTE had itself already decided to withdraw in the face of the army advance on Jaffna and had already removed its property. At 6.00 P.M. on the day it issued a threatening order importuning the civilians to move out within ten hours, threatening to blow up the connecting bridge over Chemmani lagoon. Those who remain, it said, would have to face the consequences of unrestrained war. During the night in pouring rain, people jam-packed the exit roads jostling, cursing and pushing each other. Elderly died of exhaustion, and infants dropped by weary mothers perished in flood waters. Apart from privation and starvation, people suffered loss of identity, basic human self-esteem, and lived with enormous guilt over parents, elders and domestic animals they left behind. As they fled the LTTE broke into their homes, looted their goods and transported them out in lorries. At one point it made

the civilians going on foot to use the railway bridge, so that LTTE lorries carrying their looted goods could use the road exit without hindrance. The experience left the civilians angry, humiliated, and utterly helpless.

The LTTE in the meantime pulled all the stops and launched a world wide propaganda campaign claiming that the people marched out en masse in demonstration of their unwillingness to live under the alien Sri Lankan government. We (the UTHR(J)) published a detailed report on the Exodus challenging the LTTE's version, basing ours on several first hand experiences. This created a stir, and it became essential to discredit us. Two similar statements in English and Tamil angrily dismissing our account and calling us names, signed by more than twenty academics from the University of Jaffna, then displaced to Killinochi, were circulated to the press in Colombo and abroad.

An article was also published on the subject by Fr.Emmanuel, former Vicar General of the RC church in Jaffna, saying that the Exodus was in effect a life saving miracle. Drawing on a Biblical expression, he likened the movement of a huge crowd through a narrow exit road to 'a camel' going through the eye of a needle', which was accomplished with grace and minimum inconvenience, thanks to the LTTE police.

A privately owned Tamil daily in Colombo which published the statement signed by the academics attacking us, declined to publish our response. A prominent Tamil alternative weekly made a sarcastic reference to some in Colombo claiming that the exodus was made under duress.

But to the people who underwent the trauma, it remains a torment to this day. It is like the torture victim who suffered something unspeakable and shameful, and cannot talk about it. The matter has not been written about in Tamil touching even distantly the deeper truths. People are relieved to see in drama or writing a mere ambiguous reference such as 'They asked us to go.' A recent book in Tamil written by a university don in Jaffna has chronicled

several experiences during the Exodus, but admits honestly that as regards the causes, he would say nothing.

Several months after the Exodus, I had occasion to talk to a colleague from the University of Jaffna, whom I knew to be a man of homely wisdom. He himself brought up the matter and said, "I say you all brought out a fine document on the Exodus, how did you get such detailed information?" I was surprised because I had seen his signature in the English statement from Killinochi attacking us, and asked him why he signed that statement. Taken aback, he immediately denied having done so! The Exodus remains the big lie where influential sections of the Tamil elite here and abroad have played their games and have tried to cover up the truth. To the people of Jaffna it remains a deep wound in the soul that they need to bear in the agony of silence.

### **The Truth in the Grapevine**

I mentioned earlier the grapevine that operates at a humbler level. The ordinary people are seldom fooled. To them much of the reporting that goes on in the Tamil media are 'attempts to bury a pumpkin in a plate of rice'

Take the LTTE leaders whose profile was high in Jaffna from about mid 1986 to July 1987. To the middle class they were often models of puritan virtue and discipline - Kittu, Rahim, Thileepan, Murali, Curdles etc... The grapevine saw them differently. Some were scarred by their role in the Anuradhapura massacre and most were given to alcoholism and drunken attacks on detainees. Badly tortured prisoners had been killed simply to protect the Movement's reputation for purity.

The politics of the period was dominated by intense personal rivalry between Mahattaya and Kittu. When Victor, the military leader of Mannar area was killed during a military operation in October 1986, his body was brought to Jaffna and huge ceremonies were organised. Even as the priest who gave the oration solemnly pronounced the words from St. John 12:24, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit", LTTE cadre were telling their friends, "When the Movement makes a big fuss over someone dead, there is bound to be foul play". Victor had failed to act against the rival group TELO in Mannar, as Kittu had done with blood curdling effect in Jaffna. Victor's relative humanity had rendered him unsafe. The morning after the bomb attack in March 1987 which lamed Kittu, Mahattaya's men were in Kittu's office, laughing sarcastically when callers asked for Kittu.

Thileepan fasted to death on orders from the Leader in September 1987 in a sensational demonstration, ostensibly to no purpose other than securing extra places on the Indian brokered interim council, which the LTTE was not serious about after securing its key demand. Murali was killed during the Indian army's advance in October 1987. Curdles had died in an accidental explosion in February '87, in a botched operation with the Leader in command. Thus by the end of 1987 the kings of Jaffna who were given a long rope for a year had practically gone to dust. In turn, Mahattaya's high profile in 1990 became uncomfortable to the leader. In 1993 Pottu Amman was used to get him out of the way. Little now in turn is heard about Pottu. That in short is the LTTE. It goes from internal crisis to internal crisis and can never find peace. This is well understood in the grapevine.

Thus the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Thileepan's death on 26<sup>th</sup> September would certainly have aroused strong emotions in the minds of the Tamil people. These emotions have nothing to do with a longing for Eelam. Thileepan symbolises the waste of the flower of Tamil youth, and his slow agonising death, the fate to which LTTE politics had condemned the community.

There is also a process of unbottling that goes on within the grapevine. Mentioned earlier was Senkathir, a protégé of Mahattaya's, who was accused of being Rajini's killer by the EPRLF. During 1991 he is said to have disappeared in a confrontation with the Sri Lankan Army near Vavuniya. But his body was not brought home. He was duly commemorated as a martyr in Nelliady. His own community was however strongly convinced that his death is an inside job. Others held that Senkathir had gone over to the Sri Lankan Army.

According to a story in the grapevine, Senkathir came to Nelliady with the Sri Lankan Army in April 1996. He stood in front of the huge cut-out commemorating him as a martyr and gazed upon it for a good while with his hands upon his hips. Then he took an axe and brought it down with a few hard blows. The story may be apocryphal rather than factual. But it contains important truths about what the people think about the LTTE and about Senkathir himself. This is the hidden media.

### **November 1986**

The question naturally arises, "If the people see the LTTE so negatively, or at least ambivalently, how has it been able to thrive? Why was there no mass protest?"

It is definitely not true that the ordinary Tamil people did not want to look at the long term implications of internal issues whenever they felt threatened by the Sri Lankan state and its forces. This is again an elite myth. In November 1986 Jaffna university student Vijitharan was abducted and killed by the LTTE, simply to soothe Kittu's personal vanity. A student protest and death fast was mobilised under the leadership of Vimaleswaran and other student leaders. Masses of people who had hitherto found no opportunity to protest against several similar violations by the LTTE joined in spontaneously. Schools too joined in. The streets were filled with protest marches and the university became the focus of mass public meetings. The support of the EPRLF also helped.

Kittu was forced to at least tactically make a pretence of negotiating with the students and pledged to find the missing student. It was but a good section of the elite that viewed the protest with contempt and worked against it. The students were constantly pressurised by derisive remarks from them to the effect that they were being petty minded, that Kittu needed his precious time for far more important things, and how gracious it was of him to drop in on this unruly lot .

When the protest ended after assurances from the LTTE and the student leaders were isolated, they were remorselessly hunted. About 10 days later on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1986, the LTTE struck at the EPRLF in the

context of confusion over a division in its leadership. In early January 1987 Prabhakaran came to Jaffna from India. Kittu, Thileepan & Co. had done their demolition work extremely well. The other militant groups that had played a crucial role in keeping the Sri Lankan army out of Jaffna and large parts of the East had been decimated with a mixture of cunning, deceit

and brute force. All independent voices had been silenced . The way was also incidentally cleared for the Sri Lankan army to walk in.

But in the course of their meteoric career in Jaffna, Kittu and Co. had acquired immense personal power and a high profile. It was time for them to go. A rising star in the LTTE is in fact on a slippery slope. Alas for human vanity.

On further assurances of safety given by the LTTE, student leader Vimalaswaran came out of hiding in 1988 to complete his finals and make a living for his family. He was gunned down like a dog in a street in Jaffna during July 1988 by an LTTE assassin. In the same month as his murder, he had written to the mother of the missing student Vijitharan, a native of Batticaloa: “We live from day to day with no guarantee for our life. You too mother, have to find some consolation in your grief as being one among the multitudes of tear-drenched mothers in our community”. These are the words of a great and compassionate man from the rural North who died in obscurity, leaving hardly a memorial at home other than in the hearts of those who went to dust like himself.

The LTTE for its part made sure that there would be no such mass protest again as in November 1986. This is one context in which the murders of Vimalaswaran, Rajini and thousands of others must be seen. Many unrecorded and unnumbered, disappeared on account of mere spontaneous and isolated village-level opposition.

### **The political resolution**

Where political implications are concerned, the distortion of truth leads to gross misrepresentation of the Tamils. From 1986 a stream of Tamil elite spokesmen and ‘peace activists’ in Colombo have been making public pronouncements to the effect that the Tamil people are behind the LTTE. If one is a little sensitive to the recent history of the Tamils, the thousands of dissenters who courted death and the abominable manner in which the LTTE swallows up young recruits and sends them to their doom, such a proposition would be seen as an absolute canard. It would be far more accurate to say that the Tamils have been smitten by a feeling of powerlessness from within, which has been and continues to be compounded by the conduct of the state and its forces.

The general approach of Tamil spokesmen in playing safe by the LTTE, is twisted and reported in chauvinistic sections of the Southern media as the Tamil people being against the government’s political package, and by extension their not being interested in anything short of separation. Such mischief has no licence from the Tamil people. The fundamental flaw in the Tamil community is therefore a sense of powerlessness among the ordinary people. Thus to Rajini, politics rather than being the vulgar power game that it normally is, was something far deeper. It was about giving a sense of dignity and self-esteem to the ordinary people, together with a collective ability to bring about change. Under such circumstances their spokesmen could speak with authority and also speak the truth. Today’s politics can be described as one of constraining the people to be cowards, so that their self acclaimed liberators can be heroes. This is the underlying truth behind the Exodus.

A similar experience in October 1987 which Rajani witnessed was among the principal motivations for writing the ‘Broken Palmyra’. Amidst the cold and inclement weather, tens of thousands of refugees, shivering, starving and frightened, were huddling around Nallur Kanthasamy Kovil, staring vacantly, with lumps of excreta among them. Meanwhile the LTTE forces were converging upon the Kovil, provoking every inch of the way, the advancing Indian army , who were total strangers to the place. As in October 1995 everyone

knew that the LTTE had decided to withdraw. Despite the acute danger in which the people were placed, they were also too scared to tell the LTTE to go as they had already decided. It was again a tragic scene of total powerlessness. This still remains the principal challenge before the Tamil community.