

# **Feeding the Tiger in the Open: Nature and consequences of Indian encouragement and glorification of the LTTE**

**Dr. Saumyajit Ray**

Assistant Professor  
School of International Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University

When the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (*Thamizh Eelam Viduthalaip Pulikal*) and other Tamil militant groups in Sri Lanka started their violent war to establish a Tamil homeland traversing the northern and eastern provinces of the island nation, it was the second time that India found a secessionist movement in its vicinity. The first was when Pakistan's Bengali majority rose in revolt against the nation's Punjabi-dominated government and decided to secede and launch Bangladesh. The Bengalis in East Pakistan accused the government in Islamabad of exploiting and dominating them through a series of discriminatory policies followed since 1947. The last straw was the election of 1970, when President Yahya Khan (in collusion with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, leader of the Pakistan People's Party) refused to hand over power to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whose Awami League had won decisively. As Rahman and his Awami League gave the call of secession, India got embroiled in the conflict, sheltering East Pakistani separatists in West Bengal and providing military training to the League's armed wing, the *Mukti Bahini* (Liberation Army).

Like in East Pakistan (which subsequently became Bangladesh through Indian intervention), the Sri Lankan war was also an ethnic war. After independence in 1948, the island's Sinhalese majority asserted itself in all spheres of public life, be it politics, economy, education, and language matters. Tamils in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), concentrated in the northern and eastern provinces of the island, found their privileged position in higher education, acquired during the colonial era, threatened by policies of the national government—grouped under the umbrella term of “standardization”—that sought to represent Sri Lanka's ethnic communities—the majority Sinhalese [an Indo-Aryan, non-Dravidian race tracing its roots to ancient *Vanga* (Bengal)] and the minority Tamils (who had arrived in the island during the early medieval period from India's Tamil country, as different from Indian Tamils who were mainly sent from British India to work in the plantations of then Ceylon) and Moslems (descendants of 16th century Arab traders but Tamil-speaking)—in higher education in proportion to their strength in the population.

**Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka**

Worse, the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which replaced English with Sinhala as the official language of the country, did not accord any official or constitutional status to Tamil. Though another legislation—the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act of 1958—mandated the use of Tamil for all public and official purposes in the northern and eastern provinces and a subsequent constitutional amendment in 1987 gave Tamil official and national language status, Tamils in Sri Lanka always perceived in the majority Sinhala—represented by both the mainstream parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), as also the radical Marxist and Sinhala nationalist *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (People's Liberation Front) and by mainstream Sinhala politicians from Don S. Senanayake to Mahinda Rajapakse—an attitude of neglect and condescension toward them and their language and culture. This perception was strengthened as the percentage of Tamils in higher education and government and state sector jobs began to fall in tandem with the rise in Sinhala representation in colleges and universities and in professional streams like medicine and engineering in proportion to their population as also in the police, civil services, and the judiciary. Anti-Tamil riots in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981, and 1983 convinced Sri Lankan Tamils that the separatist sentiment first expressed in the 1950s and reiterated by the Tamil United Front (TUF, a precursor to the TULF) in 1972 and by the TULF in 1976, under the able and visionary leadership of S.J. Velupillai Chelvanayakam, must be converted to a separatist movement aimed at the creation of a Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka (*Ilankai Eelam*).

When Chelvanayakam broke away from the All Ceylon Tamil Congress in 1949 in protest against the latter's cooperation with the United National Party and its pro-Sinhala policies he launched its separate Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (Lankan Tamil Federal Party), better known by its acronym ITAK, little did he know what he was starting. ITAK espoused federalism as the only viable means for the majority Sinhala to share power with the Tamil minority and resolve ethnic issues. On his part, Chelvanayakam signed two pacts with successive Ceylonese Prime Ministers, first with S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1957 and then with Dudley Senanayake in 1965, to give some sort of autonomy to Tamils in a federal Ceylon. Unfortunately, under pressure from Sinhala nationalists, both Prime Ministers subsequently repudiated and abrogated the pacts, leaving Chelvanayakam and his associates in the lurch. By 1972, Chelvanayakam joined a host of other Tamil parties to launch the Tamil United Front (TUF) which expressed support for the cause of Tamil separatism for the first time. In 1976, the TUF renamed itself the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) at a convention which, among other things, called for the creation of a "sovereign, secular, socialist Tamil Eelam" through non-violent and parliamentary means. Surely, Chelvanayakam had come a long way.

Though officially led since 1976 by the moderate TULF, the Tamil separatist movement soon passed into the hands of a host of militant groups which initially provided the TULF with necessary muscle power but thought it more prudent to dissociate itself from the TULF'S parliamentary and electoral politics and engage in full-blown militancy in the face of government intransigence. The most prominent among them were the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS), the Tamil Eelam Liberation

Organization (TELO), the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). All of them had popular support, though in varying degrees, and a ready sympathizer, India. Both the Indira Gandhi-led Congress government in New Delhi and the two major parties in India's Tamil Nadu, the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Opposition Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), were willing to provide moral, material, financial, logistical, and military assistance to them. India's first experience with an ethnic separatist movement in its neighborhood was exuberant and exhilarating. It did not know that its second experience would be damaging and disastrous.

### **Thimpu talks: The beginning of official Indian involvement**

As the movement for Tamil Eelam became increasingly violent, the government of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, son and successor to Indira Gandhi, helped organize peace talks in July-August 1985 between Tamil separatist groups and the Sri Lankan government with the avowed purpose of ending the civil war in the beleaguered island nation. The Tamil groups—which included the moderate TULF and the militant EPRLF, PLOTE, TELO, and the LTTE—put demands which were impossible for the Sri Lankan government to concede. They wanted the government in Colombo to recognize not only the Sri Lankan Tamils' right to self-determination but also their identity as a separate nation and the existence of a Tamil homeland (which they called *Ilankai Eelam*) in the northern and eastern provinces of the country. Declaring that the demands were an affront to Sri Lankan sovereignty, the government delegation led by Hector Jayewardene (brother of then president Junius R. Jayewardene) withdrew from the talks. The Tamil separatist groups remained defiant and maintained a rigid stance with regard to their audacious demands. The reasons for this rigidity in the stand of the Tamil separatist groups are not far to seek. Though Rajiv Gandhi was well-intentioned in his attempt to resolve the Sri Lankan crisis, his late mother was party to a surreptitious program to shelter, fund, and train Tamil guerillas in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. In fact, both the major parties in the state, the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the opposition Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) were sympathetic to and supportive of the *Eelam* cause, and had beseeched her separately to intervene in Sri Lanka on behalf of the island's Tamils. To these parties, Tamil *Eelam* provided them with the opportunity to expand their electoral support base: by promoting Tamil *Eelam*, they wanted voters in Tamil Nadu to perceive them as upholders of Tamil rights and interests beyond the shores of India.

Accordingly, they had no problem in facilitating the training of Sri Lankan Tamil rebels in the state. Soon, Tamil Nadu was to become a safe haven and hideout for Tamil militants fleeing the law in the island nation. Sporadic anti-Tamil violence in Sri Lanka had spurred Sri Lankan Tamil migration to Tamil Nadu from 1981 itself, but the state gradually became the preferred destination of Sri Lankan Tamil rebels. Though anti-Indian sentiment grew in Sri Lanka, both within the government and among the majority Sinhalese, Tamil separatist groups, confident of Indian support to their cause, became increasingly defiant. They knew fully well that the Sri Lankan government delegation at Thimpu would never accept their separatist demands. But they knew also for sure that New Delhi was capable and willing to help them

achieve *Eelam*. They had seen India doing it in East Pakistan in 1971. There was no reason why it should not do it again in Sri Lanka in 1985.

### **MGR and the LTTE**

Formed in 1976 (the same year as the TULF) by the Valvettithurai-born Velupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE shot into prominence with its 1983 ambush of a Sri Lankan Army patrol near Jaffna, killing thirteen soldiers. Earlier, Prabhakaran himself achieved notoriety when he assassinated the pro-Colombo Jaffna Mayor Alfred Duraipappah in July 1975. The 1983 ambush triggered the worst anti-Tamil riots in the island, resulting in the destruction of the lives and property of hundreds of Sri Lankan Tamils and rendered around 150,000 of them homeless. Though Prabhakaran was the most wanted man in Sri Lanka by then, he emerged as the most loved and venerated figure among the island's Tamils with hundreds of young Tamil boys and girls joining the LTTE. Gun-toting LTTE cadre, with cyanide capsules dangling from gold chains around their necks, became the ultimate symbol of commitment to the *Eelam* cause: they were willing to give up their lives as readily as they were willing to take the lives of others on a single command from their leader, Prabhakaran.

Prabhakaran was also a favorite of then Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, M.G. Ramachandran. The iconic MGR (as he was known to millions of his followers and admirers) was a Tamil movie superstar who had joined the DMK at the height of his popularity but broke away from it in late 1972 to form his own ADMK (subsequently renamed AIADMK). Called *Puratchi Thalaivar* (Revolutionary Leader) by his supporters, MGR led his party to victory in three consecutive state Assembly elections, ruling Tamil Nadu as its beloved Chief Minister from 1977 till his demise ten years later, with a six-month interregnum in 1980. Even though MGR had fought the 1977 and 1980 Assembly elections against Indira Gandhi's Congress, he had subsequently softened his stance toward that party. In fact, Indira Gandhi, who was allergic to assertive and popular regional satraps, was unwilling to encourage MGR. However, the AIADMK fought the 1984 Assembly elections in alliance with the Congress. By then, Indira Gandhi was gone.

MGR, himself a Malayalee born in Ceylon, was well aware of the problems faced by the Tamils of Sri Lanka. In his eyes, Prabhakaran was a real-life hero and liberator of his people. As he saw it, the salvation of Sri Lanka's Tamils lay in joining the violent struggle of the LTTE as the only means of achieving *Eelam*. So MGR was willing to go out of his way in helping it, even providing it with financial help to fund its activities. In fact, MGR is reported to have given 40 million rupees to Prabhakaran from his own pocket, at the same time extracting a promise from the rebel leader not to take any help from Karunanidhi. In fact, Prabhakaran refused to take funds that Karunanidhi raised during his TESO conference held in Madurai in May 1986 out of fear of offending MGR.<sup>1</sup> Meeting Prabhakaran on a number of occasions in Madras, MGR emerged as the biggest foreign champion and sponsor of the LTTE, much more than his rival M. Karunanidhi and his DMK. This, despite the fact that MGR neither made any public statement in support of establishing Eelam nor organized any public rally in solidarity with the cause.

It is not that Prabhakaran always listened to MGR. When he refused to participate in talks that Rajiv Gandhi proposed to hold between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil rebels to resolve the ethnic issue in the island nation, MGR had the Tamil Nadu Police confiscate the LTTE's weapons. Prabhakaran went on an indefinite fast in protest, and received support from an unlikely quarter: DMK chief M. Karunanidhi. The *Kalaignar*, who was not fond of Prabhakaran and had expressed his displeasure with the LTTE and its rampant use of violence, spoke out against MGR's order on the ground that the LTTE needed the weapons for self-defense. MGR handed back the weapons to the LTTE before long.<sup>2</sup>

MGR did another favor to the LTTE, saving it from getting exterminated in 1987 itself. In May that year, General Cyril Ranatunga of the Sri Lankan Army, brought back from retirement to infuse energy and enthusiasm in the forces, had the LTTE on the run during the Vadamarachchi campaign. Using thousands of ground troops, naval gunboats, helicopter gunships, and ground-attack aircraft, Gen. Ranatunga liberated the Vadamarachchi area in the Jaffna peninsula from LTTE control. But the valiant military chief was stopped from entering Jaffna town when the Indian government intervened to suspend the military campaign. But for this Indian intervention, the LTTE would have been wiped out back in May-June 1987. The reason behind the Indian intervention was the pressure exerted on Rajiv Gandhi by state government led by MGR.<sup>3</sup>

When the Indian government tried to "arm-twist" Prabhakaran into accepting the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord—signed between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Junius R. Jayewardene on 29 July 1987 and which, among other things, wanted the LTTE to disarm—the LTTE supremo found support in a sympathetic MGR, specially flown from Madras to Delhi to reason with Prabhakaran and influence him to accept the Accord. MGR displayed enough courage and honesty to defy the Indian political establishment and throw his lot behind Prabhakaran and his expressed stand of not disarming the LTTE and discontinuing the armed struggle.<sup>4</sup> In less than six months, MGR was dead.

### **Karunanidhi, Tamil *Eelam*, and TESO**

Muthuvel Karunanidhi, the second non-Congress Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, was an early adherent to the cause of Sri Lankan Tamils. Unlike MGR, Karunanidhi had no hesitation in extending public support to the cause of Tamil *Eelam*. Only that he did not like the use of violence for the purpose and the fratricidal war going on in Sri Lanka between the various Tamil militant groups. In fact, Karunanidhi blamed this internecine war for the failure to achieve Tamil *Eelam*.

Karunanidhi's association with the Sri Lankan Tamil cause was an old one. Not only was he close to Chelvanayakam and his successor A. Amirthalingam of the TULF, he had condemned the Sinhala Only policy of 1956 through a resolution passed by the DMK general council meeting held at Chidambaram. Whenever there was anti-Tamil violence in Sri Lanka, Karunanidhi organized rallies in protest, be it 1977 or 1983. In fact, after the anti-Tamil riots of in 1983, that proved to be turning point in the struggle for Eelam, Karunanidhi and DMK DMK general secretary K. Anbazhagan resigned their Assembly seats in protest.<sup>5</sup> Karunanidhi had also launched the Tamil Eelam Supporters' Organization (TESO) on 13 May

1985 with the avowed purpose of providing assistance to Sri Lankan Tamil groups dedicated to the creation of creating Tamil *Eelam*.

Even though he openly aligned with the *Eelam* cause, Karunanidhi did not approve of the LTTE and its ruthlessly violent methods. He turned against the LTTE, though not irrevocably, when it eliminated Sri Sabaratnam, leader of the TELO, with whom he was particularly close, on 6 May 1986. Two days back, Karunanidhi had organized a TESO conference in Madurai not only to focus the attention of the Indian political class on the plight of the Tamils in Sri Lanka but also to call upon the Tamil militant groups in the island to stop their fratricidal war and unite for the purpose of achieving *Eelam*. In fact, during the conference, Karunanidhi had appealed to the LTTE to spare the life of Sabaratnam, but in vain; Sabaratnam, who was on the run from the LTTE, was traced and mercilessly butchered by the LTTE's Jaffna commander Sathasivam Krishnakumar, popularly called "Kittu".<sup>6</sup>

But Karunanidhi in power was always different from Karunanidhi in the Opposition. A leader who had tried to prevail on onetime ally Indira Gandhi to carve Tamil *Eelam* out of Sri Lanka just as she did with Pakistan in 1971, but opposed the violent methods of the LTTE, gave the LTTE a free run after taking over as Chief Minister in 1989, allowing the militant group to smuggle arms and medicines to Jaffna. It was the time the LTTE was fighting rival groups in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the departure of the Indian Peace Keeping Force. In fact, Karunanidhi helped the LTTE to get away unapprehended after it killed the EPRLF's K. Padmanabha in Madras in June 1990. Karunanidhi was dismissed as Chief Minister on January 1991, a little more than two years after he took office, on charges of fomenting and aiding terrorism. The one who leveled the charge was his new *bete noire*, the AIADMK's J. Jayalalithaa. In a radical departure from the policies of her mentor MGR, Jayalalithaa bitterly opposed the LTTE and its activities in the state. As Chief Minister, she did everything in her capacity to uproot it from Tamil Nadu.<sup>7</sup>

### **The run-up to the Rajiv Gandhi assassination**

By 1991, the LTTE had got rid of all its rival organizations. Most of the members of TELO were butchered by Prabhakaran's boys soon after their leader Sri Sabaratnam was killed in May 1986. Incidentally, TELO had the backing of India's DMK and Karunanidhi. On the other hand, MGR lavishly funded and armed the LTTE. In a curious political drama never repeated since, the rivalry between the AIADMK and the DMK in Tamil Nadu was played out as a fratricidal conflict between the LTTE and the TELO in northern Sri Lanka. Though Karunanidhi opposed this fratricidal war, MGR did not intervene in the LTTE's military decisions.

In July 1989, PLOTE supremo Uma Maheswaran—a former LTTE cadre and colleague of Prabhakaran—was assassinated in Colombo. Many believe that the assassination was the handiwork of Indian intelligence agencies. Most of the PLOTE was wiped out by the LTTE, the remnants reconvened as a paramilitary group supporting the Sri Lankan Army in operations against the LTTE in subsequent years. The same fate had befallen the EPRLF, which ceased to exist as a fighting force after the LTTE inflicted

a crushing defeat on it in December 1986. In less than four years, the LTTE eliminated K. Padmanabha, the EPRLF's most prominent leader in Madras. Another prominent EPRLF functionary, Douglas Devananda, took to electoral politics. Interestingly, EROS was the only Tamil militant group which worked in cooperation with the LTTE, both before and during the IPKF period. In 1990, it merged with the LTTE.

Appapillai Amirthalingam of the TULF, former Member of Parliament and Leader of the Opposition, was perhaps the only prominent moderate Tamil leader who was assassinated by the LTTE. Irked by Amirthalingam's acceptance of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord and his repeated participation in peace talks with the Sri Lankan government, the LTTE gunned him down at his residence in Colombo in July 1989. The LTTE also got the Indian Peace Keeping Force—sent to Sri Lanka under the terms of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord in July 1987 with the avowed purpose of disarming the LTTE (and other Tamil groups) and maintain peace in northern Sri Lanka—expelled from the island. The LTTE refused to disarm and soon got involved in frequent gun battles with the IPKF. Needless to say, the IPKF found it extremely difficult to fight the Tamil Tigers in unfamiliar territory. In a situation of supreme irony, the rabidly anti-Indian Ranasinghe Premadasa, who was elected President of Sri Lanka in January 1989, found with the LTTE a common enemy: India. He also common cause with the LTTE: getting the IPKF removed from Sri Lankan soil. Incidentally, Premadasa, who was Prime Minister under President Jayewardene and belonged to the latter's UNP, was bitterly opposed to the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord. A Sinhala nationalist, Premadasa hated the LTTE. Under the changed circumstances, though, Premadasa armed and funded the LTTE to fight the IPKF. Soon after taking office, he ordered the IPKF to leave Sri Lanka. The new Indian government, headed by V.P. Singh (an ally of Karunanidhi, who had by then come to oppose the IPKF presence in Sri Lanka) had no hesitation in withdrawing the IPKF. Now that the IPKF was gone, a cunning Premadasa unleashed the Sri Lankan Army on the LTTE. Three years later, on 1 May 1993, Premadasa was assassinated by an LTTE suicide bomber.

As the governments of both V.P. Singh and his successor Chandra Shekhar proved unstable, fresh parliamentary elections were called in India in early 1991. Though the Congress was not particularly strong, the media created a widespread impression that former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who had lost power in late 1989, was on a comeback. There was also another media rumor: if Rajiv was voted to power again, he would send the IPKF back into Sri Lanka once more. And this time, the IPKF's mandate would be wipe out the LTTE. More importantly, Rajiv's ally in Tamil Nadu, the bitterly anti-LTTE J. Jayalithaa, was expected to win the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections that year and become Chief Minister.

Ignoring an advisory by the Intelligence Bureau not to visit Tamil Nadu after sundown, Rajiv Gandhi went campaigning for his party in the small town of Sriperumbudur—40 kms away from Madras (now Chennai) on the Madras-Bangalore Highway—on 21 May 1991. Around 10.10 pm, as the former Indian Prime Minister was approaching the podium, making his way through the crowd, an LTTE suicide bomber

named Thenmozhi Rajaratnam (Thanu/Dhanu in short) detonated a belt bomb she was wearing on her body, killing herself, Rajiv, and fourteen others on the spot. Till date, Rajiv Gandhi remains the only foreign leader that the LTTE assassinated. Jayalalithaa announced that her stand that Tamil Nadu had become a den of the Tamil Tigers with the support of the Karunanidhi-led state government (dismissed earlier in January 1991), creating a grave security for India, had been vindicated.

### Conclusion

There is no doubt that the politics of Tamil Nadu had a decisive role to play in the Sri Lankan civil war. Indian intervention in the *Eelam* war, in the form of imparting military training to Sri Lankan Tamil guerillas, began as a result of pressure mounted on the central government by both the major parties in Tamil Nadu. Though the then ruling AIADMK and the Opposition DMK ended up supporting different militant groups, they forced the Indian government to protect Tamil interests in Sri Lanka. If Karunanidhi wanted Indira Gandhi to partition Sri Lanka and carve out a separate sovereign Tamil *Eelam* the way she made a Bangladesh out of East Pakistan in 1971, MGR supplied both arms and money to the LTTE to fight the Sri Lankan security forces and rival militant groups. India's regional Tamil parties also prevailed on the Indian government to stop a decisive military offensive launched by Sri Lanka to wipe out the LTTE in May 1987. Again, the government of India withdrew the IPKF under pressure from the Tamil Nadu government when the IPKF, which had failed to disarm the LTTE, was engaged in a fight to the finish with the Tamil Tigers. The result was disastrous.

Not only did the LTTE go on a murderous spree in Sri Lanka with its suicide bombings, assassination of leaders (both Sinhala and Tamil), kidnappings, indiscriminate civilian killings, it set up a de facto Eelam state in the northern and eastern provinces with a navy (the dreaded Sea Tigers), an air force, and a regular army. It also set up a civil administration with tax collectors and police stations. It had dedicated contingents of women and children, many of whom were kidnapped at gunpoint from homes, schools and colleges, and work places. The government of India and the Tamil regional parties in India knew all this yet did nothing to contain the LTTE. In tandem with the political establishment, the Indian media unashamedly glorified the LTTE, mystifying Prabhakaran as a leader in the category of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Nelson Mandela, Yasser Arafat, and Ho Chi Minh. Needless to say, all these leaders, themselves guilty of running murderous campaigns within their countries and outside, were immensely popular in India. This was the situation till the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.

Though the LTTE was subsequently banned in India (the last time the ban was renewed was in 2019), and the organization has effectively ceased to exist, political elements in Tamil Nadu—like V. Gopalasamy (Vaiko for short)—still make noise in support of the LTTE and try to revive *Eelam*. There is no doubt that these elements know fully well that they are flogging a dead horse, but they are simply attempting to draw some political and electoral mileage by evoking the memory of the Tamil militants of Sri Lanka, especially the LTTE. Jayalalithaa remains the only Tamil leader of consequence to speak out against the nefarious activities of the LTTE and move against it when in power.

The children of Rajiv Gandhi had done everything in their capacity to show sympathy to and plead for amnesty for their father's killers. Even though they had tried their best to appear as embodiments of forgiveness despite grave personal loss, there is no doubt that their stand is dictated by political and electoral compulsions. Their Congress party is in alliance with the DMK in the state. Even though Karunanidhi was personally allergic to Prabhakaran, he did everything, in power and outside, that helped the LTTE. Undoubtedly, the compulsions of Tamil Nadu politics have rendered the ban on the LTTE meaningless. Fortunately for India, the people of Tamil Nadu were swayed neither by their leaders' glorification of the LTTE nor by the LTTE's desire to establish a greater *Eelam* that would include Tamil Nadu and have Chennai as its capital.

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