

The missing link

THE SUNDAY TIMES 27.11.94

By Rajan Hoole

An almost forgotten incident which took place in the University of Jaffna in November 1986 encapsulates some of the key issues of peace that have refused to go away.

A student, Vijitharan, disappeared after being abducted by the LTTE, allegedly at the instigation of Kittu, then Jaffna leader. Vimalaswaran, a committed and politically mature student leader led a protest fast, which attracted, to the LTTE's chagrin, large crowds of sympathisers to the university.

Vijitharan

At the request of a section of the students, a group of Christian clergy came forward to defuse the tension. The clergy found Kittu, who served them hot coffee, very accomodative on the surface. He agreed to meet the student leaders. The clergy felt that once the two sides shook hands and made pledges of intent, peace would be restored. Many were taken aback by Vimalaswaran's response upon Kittu's arrival. He said, "Everything they (the LTTE) are doing (eg. harassment and intimidation of protesters) shows their contempt for our basic human concerns. Under this dispensation, empty public gestures of accommodation mean nothing."

Many on the university staff praised what appeared to them Kittu's statesmanlike generosity and regarded the protesters with disdain. A settlement was eventually negotiated. But once the students dispersed, their leaders were hunted down. Vijitharan too instead of being released, is understood to have been killed later in an LTTE camp. Vimalaswaran did not live another two years. He was gunned down by the LTTE within a mile of the university, bearing eloquent testimony to his own words.

Vimalaswaran was from Pooneryn in the rural north, and with many like him, came of humble peasant stock. The experience of such persons who had matured and mellowed through the liberation struggle was an invaluable asset to the Tamil community. It is such persons that the LTTE has systematically eliminated. Also significantly, it is from such peasant backgrounds that the LTTE has cornered and trapped large numbers of young boys and girls into joining its ranks. Having

eliminated their natural leaders, the LTTE alone stood between an oppressive emptiness of their society and the oppressive conduct of the Sri Lankan state, to give them meaning. Those of tender age were brutalised, sent on massacres of civilians in other communities, and many are utterly ruined. Suicide for them is a natural wish.

For the elite in general, the fate of hundreds like Vimalaswaran meant nothing. Only occasionally did political killings touch their circles. By the mid 80s the supposition that 'if you keep out of politics you are safe' became their form of escapism. It is this class, the natural spokesmen of the Tamils, that has repeatedly put forward the formula 'peace without Democracy is better than No Peace'. It is a formula by which they and the LTTE hope to secure their narrow interests at great cost to the Tamil masses. The formula is obviously flawed. Since the origin of political killings in the early 80s, over 20,000 Tamils have been killed. Although state forces were responsible for most killings, an unknown number, well over 2000 died in internal killings, with several hundreds eliminated in torture camps.

The politics had developed an internal dynamic which in turn trapped the LTTE into repeatedly rejecting political alternatives to war. The rhetoric of Eelam, the glorification of suicide, the worldwide network for targeting opponents, links with crime, cannot all be switched off without breaking the LTTE machine itself.

Tamil 'elite'

Members of the Tamil elite who went abroad financed teenaged peasant boys and girls at home to literally blow themselves up. The process of boosting their personal ego helped confound the Tamil people. They had long left behind several healthy human inhibitions. They believed in the power over life and death of individuals in any part of the world. The moral and political paralysis of the Tamils was almost complete.

Among those who worked hardest for the PA victory were groups in the South who saw peace as a coming together of peoples. In stark contrast to stereotyped expectations, their peace meetings were hosted by pirivenas, presided over by senior Buddhist monks and were

enthusiastically received. Audiences who came to appreciate the alienation of the Tamils, posed the question whether there were parallel efforts at understanding and reconciliation in the Tamil areas. It is here that a painful gap in the peace process became evident. Had there been a healthy liberation struggle which encouraged the Tamil people to open out, such a question would never have been asked. Instead of the people being involved, what was coming from the Tamil side were mostly manipulative messages from LTTE functionaries in various parts of the world, often conveyed by elite intermediaries.

Tamil ambivalence

The ordinary Tamils and Muslims would hardly look to the LTTE to solve their problems. They know from bitter experience that far from addressing their problems the LTTE exacerbated them as a means to its survival. But because of their experience of the state the Tamils retain mental blocks which cause them to be ambivalent about the LTTE. The Tamils have also voted in the wake of an eleven year leadership vacuum and disillusionment with their politics. All accounts suggest that because of the patent goodwill and sincerity shown by Ms. Kumaratunge, the Tamils now cling to her as their last hope. For the first time since 1956 a southerner has the potential to become a leader also of the Tamils. It is their wish that she and her government should address their problems.

The government should have no difficulty in finding out the problems of the Tamils without asking the LTTE.

This tremendous opportunity as well as responsibility could be discharged only if the government insistently holds to the moral high ground. It will receive a good deal of counsel and promises from the LTTE lobby as well as from persons experimenting with conflict resolution to go for deceptive short cuts, which in effect empower and legitimise the LTTE at the expense of the Tamil people. If we are to learn from our own history rather than listen to intellectually unsound applications of experiences elsewhere to our context, we cannot afford

to be either intellectually lazy or morally compromising.

The government has rightly highlighted the need for a political solution, and this is primarily about empowering the Tamil people. Hence talks with the LTTE should in the first instance be about a political solution and about extending and reinforcing democracy and human rights throughout the country. Matters of administration and policing arise only in the context of a political solution. The LTTE should be challenged to prove its bona fides as representatives of the Tamil people by means other than terror. The Tamil people have placed the president in a strong position to take this approach.

The recent bomb explosion in Colombo showed that the new government endured a significant test by not being panicked into reverting to a brutal approach to the Tamil problem. To sustain this, some clear thinking is needed on how state institutions will respond in future without losing the moral high ground and once more alienating the Tamils. This will clear several mental blocks among the Tamils. The most serious block results from a feeling of having to end up with nothing after long years of suffering. For historical reasons the notion of self determination strikes a strong emotional chord. This could be overcome only by the government unambiguously putting forward its own political solution. Any further delay would be costly and inexcusable.

The warning

A mismanagement of this opportunity could easily result in paranoia and tragedy. Such an eventuality would neither be the fault of the ordinary Sinhalese people nor of the ordinary Tamil people. Nor would it have anything to do with 'Sinhalese Buddhist chauvinism' or the 'Mahawansa mentality'.

The responsibility now rests with the government and with the Tamil elite to understand the paralysis of the Tamil community and take political measures that would give its ordinary people a degree of freedom to express themselves. This alone would furnish the missing link in the peace process.

The author is a member of
University Teachers for Human Rights,
University of Jaffna