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### Pirapaharan, Chapter 29 The Indian Interest

by **T. Sabaratnam**; published February 4, 2004



#### 29. The Indian Interest

##### Trincomalee Problem

The interest RAW officials showed in the Trincomalee harbour helped Pirapaharan to figure out the puzzle. He knew that New Delhi was concerned about its security and had an aspiration to become the regional power. Its interest in the Sri Lankan Tamil problem was subject to India's overall national interest.

India was disturbed in 1981 when it was rumoured that the Jayewardene government had offered facilities to the American Navy at Trincomalee. In that year, Colombo lifted the nine-year ban on foreign warships using the facilities in the Trincomalee harbour and the US Navy sent several ships there. Indian newspapers published a report which quoted General David Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, saying that there was a possibility of Trincomalee being considered as a potential US base in the Indian Ocean.



Trincomalee harbor

New Delhi newspapers also copied a news story from the *Washington Post*, which quoted a Pentagon Project Report for 1980-81, which advocated the establishment of an American naval base in Trincomalee that could be used as a stopping place for US ships in the Indian Ocean. Indian newspapers also published another story about some US Congressmen, with the blessing of the State Department, approaching the Sri Lankan embassy in Washington for "rest and recreation" facilities at Trincomalee for US sailors in the Indian Ocean.

These reports fuelled the Indian fear that Jayewardene, nicknamed Yankee Dicky (Yankee because of his American leaning and Dicky his pet name) by Sri Lankan leftists, was dragging Sri Lanka into the anti-India circle America was building in the Indian sub-continental region. In those days of heightened cold war, the encirclement and balkanization of India was American policy. The southern semi-circle, Israel-Pakistan-China, would be complete if Sri Lanka was drawn into it. America, through the CIA, was supporting separatist movements in India in order to splinter the sub-continental nation into smaller states inimical to each other.

India's fear was concretized in 1981 by two decisions made by the Colombo government. The first was to revive the Oil Tank Farm at Trincomalee, a farm of 101 huge oil storage tanks built by the British during the Second World War. It was not used after the war and Jayewardene announced that the government would lease it to any country that made the highest offer. International tenders were called for in 1981.

Mathew, the Industries Minister, held a press conference to announce the tender. I attended the conference representing the *Daily News*. I asked Mathew whether the government took India's sensitivities on that matter into consideration before calling for the tender. His immediate reaction was one of annoyance. "The tanks are in our territory. We can offer it to any company or country that gives us the best offer. Why should we ask India?" he fumed.

The question of India's sensitivity was raised by Thondaman when the cabinet considered the matter. Jayewardene dismissed the concern, saying they need not worry unnecessarily about India. In an interview to an Indian correspondent he said, "We will give it to anybody we like- we must have friends in the world." India reacted instantly. It put its firm point of view through news analyst M. G. Gupta. He wrote: How mistaken is the Sri Lankan President with regard to Trincomalee. No government of India can ever permit Trincomalee to fall into unfriendly hands... India has to feel concerned about the damage an irresponsible government in the island can cause to India's security by a false move... and must under all circumstances, and irrespective of the consequences, counter such a move."



PM Indira Gandhi and her son, Sanjay

India did counter Jayewardene's decision when he decided to lease the oil tanks for 29 years to The Coastal Corporation, a Texas-based oil company operating through a subsidiary in Bermuda. The Coastal Corporation, which would get the exclusive control of the Oil Tank Farm, offered to pay a down payment of 35,000 US dollars and an annual rental of 30,000 US dollars for the first year with an annual increase of 10 percent. The American company would be free to use or hire out the facilities at its discretion. Mathew announced that the government had reserved the right to prohibit foreign naval vessels using the tanks but the *Sunday Times*, London said that prohibition was incapable of being implemented. India protested against the deal and it was cancelled.

Jayewardene revived the Oil Tank Farm issue in the latter part of 1983, when he was seeking American and British assistance to resist Indian pressure, which grew tremendously after the July riots, and Ceylon Petroleum called for fresh tenders. The tender was awarded on 23 February 1984 to an international consortium of three firms- the Oroleum (Pvt) Limited of Singapore, the Oil Tanking of Western Germany and the Tradinaft of Switzerland. These firms were controlled by Western interests and the Swiss company owned the major share in a Pakistani business house.

Mathew announced the awarding of the tender to the consortium at a press conference held in the boardroom of the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation. I covered it for the *Daily News*. The PTI (Press Trust of India) correspondent, who had been obviously briefed by the Indian High Commission, questioned Mathew about the rejection of the Indian firm's tender which, he said, was more beneficial to Sri Lanka. Mathew put the blame on the technical evaluation committee which, he said, had found the Indian firm incompetent. The PTI correspondent questioned extensively about the consortium, pointing out that it was formed in 1982 with the sole purpose of getting the Trincomalee deal.

Later, Opposition Leader Anura Bandaranaike raised the matter in parliament. He revealed that eight firms had tendered for the Oil Tank Farm and they included well-known Indian, British and Soviet firms. He said that, according to his information, the Indian proposal was more beneficial to Sri Lanka. He charged Mathew and the government of foul play. He accused the government of taking the first step to hand over Trincomalee, one of the world's best natural harbours, to the Americans.

Three years later, on 8 January 1987, opening a debate on foreign policy in parliament, Anura Bandaranaike recalled:

"When the Trincomalee Oil Tank came up, India tendered for it. I brought this matter up in this House and I was called an Indian stooge. India gave us the best offer in every sense of the word. What did we do? We rejected the Indian offer and gave the tender to some utterly useless, miserable little company in Singapore, whose chairman was some foreigner. His wife was the deputy chairman and his peon was the member of the board of directors. The whole thing fell through and

India has got the impression that you gave the tender to a fraudulent company merely to keep India out of it.”

India was incensed about the awarding of the tender to the consortium. In New Delhi foreign policy planners suspected that Jayewardene was bent on providing the facilities of the Trincomalee harbour and the Oil Tank Farm to the Americans in return for a defence pact. India exerted tremendous pressure on Jayewardene and the Oil Tank Farm deal fell through.

India was not satisfied with merely exerting diplomatic pressure. India planned to destabilize the Colombo government and was prepared for military action if the situation demanded. It made use of the atrocities committed on the Tamil people and their demand for a separate state for this purpose.

Indira Gandhi instructed the ministries of defence and foreign affairs to prepare a paper on the options available to India. Two sets of options were prepared, the hard and soft options. The hard option was based on the Bangladesh example. Militant groups would lead the military thrust and the Indian army would wrap it up. The soft option was for the application of diplomatic pressure. Indira Gandhi rejected the hard option and opted for the soft one. She agreed with RAW officials who proposed the use of militant violence to pressurize Jayewardene to respond to the diplomatic moves.

Military officers detailed to train Tamil militants hinted to the trainees about the possibility of India invading Sri Lanka and defined the role of the Tamil militant groups as that of an auxiliary force. “You people will have to show us the way and we will do the rest,” a senior officer told to Shankar Raji. Douglas Devananda,



Sri Lanka

who trained in Lebanon in guerrilla warfare, said the training given to them in India was for conventional warfare. Pirapaharan found the arms given to them were old and outdated. He fretted: “See! They are giving us old stuff. They think we are stupid.”

The training was directed towards meeting India’s objective. The militants were taught map reading, drawing sketches of road bridges, railway tracks and vital installations, photographing locations, identifying open spaces suitable for landing helicopters, spying on the movements of ships. Two special groups of TELO cadres were trained to collect information about the Trincomalee harbour.

Most of the Tamil militant leaders figured out India’s plan. “We knew that India is using us for their foreign policy and strategic objectives,” Shankar Raji said.

The militant groups had no option but to fall in line. Pirapaharan gauged the situation quickly. He realized that India’s interest ran counter to that of the Sri Lankan Tamils. And to achieve the Sri Lankan Tamil aspiration of a separate state, he would have to resist India.

The clash of interests came to the fore in July 1987 when Rajiv Gandhi decided to sign the Indo- Sri Lanka Peace Treaty. Indian negotiators were willing to give in on matters concerning a solution to the ethnic problem. They were adamant to include in the agreement India’s main concerns:

preventing the presence of foreign military and intelligence personnel in Sri Lanka,

preventing Sri Lanka from making available Trincomalee or other ports for military use by any country,

restoration of the Oil Tank Farm as a joint venture by India and Sri Lanka, and

reviewing Sri Lanka’s agreement with foreign broadcasting organizations to ensure the broadcasting facilities are not used for any military or intelligence purposes.

This last concern included in the 1987 Indo- Sri Lanka Accord, the VOA, was not an issue in 1982. However, other matters such as Jayewardene ridiculing Indira Gandhi and her younger son Sanjay as "cow and calf" in his 1977 election speeches, his closeness to Morarji Desai and Sanjeewa Reddy, and the stripping of Sirimavo Bandaranaike's civic rights influenced Indira Gandhi's Sri Lanka policy. That led to her decision to refuse Colombo's request to eradicate Pirapaharan and Uma Maheswaran when they were arrested in Chennai after the shootout in 1981.

### Operation Recovery Tiger

The Sri Lankan delegation headed by IGP Rudra Rajasingham made an official request to deport Pirapaharan and Uma Maheswaran to Sri Lanka when it met Tamil Nadu IGP K. Mohandas. Rajasingham provided to Mohandas two files detailing the crimes Pirapaharan and Uma Maheswaran had committed to support his request. He argued that they had to face the trial for their criminal acts.

Mohandas deftly dodged the issue. He said the question of deportation was a central government subject and the decision had to be made in New Delhi. He promised to cooperate if the central government acceded to the Sri Lankan request.

In New Delhi, foreign ministry officials politely rejected the Sri Lankan request. They told the Sri Lankan delegation that India was not bound to deport the two guerrilla chiefs as there was no extradition treaty between the two countries. They added that the two men were arrested on charges of breach of peace, attempted murder and for committing offences against the Indian Explosives Act and the Indian Weapons Act. The police would charge them before the courts in Tamil Nadu and that process should conclude before taking any decision about the Sri Lankan request for extradition.

Rajasingham returned empty handed. The *Saturday Review*, the weekly printed in Jaffna, ridiculed the failed mission calling it 'Operation Recovery Tiger.' It also pointed out the sea change that had occurred between 1973, when India willingly deported Kuttimani, and the present time. Then, with Sirimavo Bandaranaike at the helm and vigorously pursuing the policy of non-alignment, India had no security concern regarding Sri Lanka's actions. Tamil militancy had not grown and state terrorism was not so severe. The Jayewardene regime had altered the environment with its leaning towards America and its systematic and planned use of the police and the armed forces to oppress the Tamils.

Tamil Nadu police produced the two militant leaders before the Chennai magistrate court on 6 August and charged them for breach of peace and possession of unlicensed weapons, all bailable offences. The court released the accused on conditional bail and ordered them to stay in different cities in Tamil Nadu till the trial was over. Pirapaharan chose Madurai and Uma Maheswaran Madras. Pirapaharan stayed with Nedumaran and Uma Maheswaran with Perum Chithiranan. Both were provided with police guards, a sub-inspector and three constables, to ensure that they stayed within the city limits of the places the court decreed. Pirapaharan had no difficulty with his guards. They soon became his admirers. They turned a blind eye whenever he went out of the city. They stopped tailing him. They also waived the court requirement that he sign at the police station daily.

There was only one instance in which a policeman searched Pirapaharan's room. Noticing that Pirapaharan was maintaining a news clipping file, he wanted to check it. He found to his astonishment clippings about Alfred Duraiappah's murder. The reports also spoke about a massive police hunt for the murderer.

"Why are you keeping these clippings? Do you know the murderer?" he queried.

An angry Pirapaharan replied: Yes I know him. I am the man."

The policeman was taken aback by this confession. He decided to warn Nedumaran that he was sheltering a murderer on the run. He went to Nedumaran's room and blurted, "Sir, You are keeping a dangerous man. He said he was a murderer."

Pirapaharan had followed the policeman into Nedumaran's room. He complained that the policeman had searched his room. Nedumaran told the policeman that he had no authority to search any room in his house without his permission. He also reported the matter to higher officers.



Pirapaharan

For Pirapaharan, the seven months he spent at Nedumaran's home were pleasant and highly productive. He was treated as a member of the family and he enjoyed the tasty vegetarian dishes Nedumaran's wife served him. He was affectionate to Nedumaran's children. He played carom with Nedumaran's six-year daughter. He told the children stories before they went to bed. Most of them were stories of Tamil bravery. Often he would relate incidents from the freedom struggle of Sri Lankan Tamils. One night, after he related the horror of the burning of the Hindu priest at Panadura in 1958, one of Nedumaran's sons, with tears in his eyes, offered to join the LTTE to fight the "demons" who did that monstrous deed. Wiping his eyes, Pirapaharan told him: "You study well. We will punish those monsters."

The seven-month stay in Madurai was one of the most fruitful periods in Pirapaharan's life. He and his cadres, most of whom had moved to Madurai, used the first month on self-criticism and mapping out their plan for the future. What have we done? Where have we gone wrong? How should we proceed from here? - were the three main questions they asked and answered.

Nedumaran was invited during this period for a conference by the Madurai Subash Chandra Bose Sangam. Pirapaharan, already an admirer of Chandra Bose, accompanied Nedumaran. He was mesmerized when the speakers eulogized Bose and his heroic Indian National Army (INA). Pirapaharan was highly moved when the participants stood to attention with the 'Bose salute' when the national anthem of the INA was sung. On his return home, Pirapaharan thanked Nedumaran for taking him for the conference and said: "How I wish that I too would be able to take the salute in a march past at least 100 LTTE cadres."

Nedumaran later said the Chandra Bose conference was a turning point in Pirapaharan's life. From then on he put into shape the plan to realize his wish. He designed the flag for the LTTE. He designed the military uniform for the Tigers. He renewed his experimentation with a code language that could be used for secret communication. He decided to train the LTTE cadres in the use of walkie-talkies. He prepared the plan for a modern communication network.



*Subash Chandra Bose*

Most important of them all was his decision, taken in July, to sever his working relation with the TELO and operate alone. He followed this with the decision to open training camps in Tamil Nadu for the LTTE. He opened three training camps- at Sirumalai, Pollachi and Metur. In those camps, old and new cadres were given shooting practice and taught the rudiments of guerrilla warfare. He hired retired Indian military officers to impart the training. Pirapaharan visited those camps for short periods to train his cadres and to hone his skills.

While Pirapaharan was busy, preparing to make his dream of forming an army like the INA come true, a message came from Amirthalingam requesting him to come to Chennai. Pirapaharan met Amirthalingam in his hotel room in Chennai. Amirthalingam told Pirapaharan that the main mission of his visit was to patch up an understanding between him and Uma. Before he could finish Pirapaharan erupted: How can that be done? He has violated the LTTE constitution. In addition to that, he has killed our supporters." Out of respect for Amirthalingam Pirapaharan consented to attend the meeting at Perum Chithiranan's house.

Pirapaharan is renowned for his devotion to his cadres and supporters. He is equally renowned for not forgiving those who harm or kill his cadres and supporters. A week after the Pandy Bazaar shootout, 26 May, P. Iraikumaran, 27, a popular social worker and a Tamil liberation activist, was shot by a gang of seven youths at Alaveddy. His friend T. Umakumaran, 28, was killed because he saw Iraikumaran's killing and could identify the murderers. Their bodies were found in a field.

Iraikumaran, a cultivation officer, was the organizing secretary of the Thamil Ilaingar Peravai Viduthalai Ani (Tamil Youth Front Liberation Wing). Previously he had been a member of the youth front aligned to the TULF and had edited a pro-TULF paper, *Ilaingar Kural* (The Voice of the Youth) in 1976. Iraikumaran broke away from the TULF after it decided to support the DDC scheme and started backing the LTTE. Pirapaharan vowed revenge, though he had given an undertaking not to kill Uma Maheswaran.

Pirapaharan's men mounted watch on Perum Chithiranan's house where Uma was living. Perum Chithiranan, who noticed Pirapaharan's men hovering around his house, did not permit Uma to go out of his house for one and a half months. He was worried. He sent word to Amirthalingam to prevail on Pirapaharan not to harm Uma.

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Pirapaharan went to the meeting at Perum Chithiranan's house with two bodyguards. He did not shake hands with Uma. Amirthalingam pleaded with Pirapaharan to mend his relationship with Uma. Pirapaharan was stern. He said he had nothing against anyone. He said he was firm that none should violate the rules and regulations of the organization. Pirapaharan scrupulously avoided mentioning names.

Amirthalingam countered: He has left the LTTE."

Pirapaharan: Leaving the organization is not enough. Those who leave the organization should retire from the struggle. The regulations prohibit starting a rival organization. That is the LTTE constitution. No one is exempted from it. If anyone persists in doing so, he is inviting death."

Perum Chithiranan was upset.

"Don't talk like that. It is true that you started the LTTE, but Uma stood by you and acted as the contact man and made the LTTE known to the world," he said.

Perum Chithiranan then reminded Pirapaharan of the days he and Uma went together to his house to draw small amounts of cash for the daily expenses. The LTTE kept its cash in a bag in Perum Chithiranan's house. He was their safe keeper. "Now you are threatening to kill each other. Don't do that," Perum Chithiranan told Pirapaharan.

Then he related what DMK founder leader C. Annadurai had said when he split from the Diravida Kalazham when Ramasamy Periyar married Maniyammai. Annadurai said their parties would function like a double barrel gun. "You two also be like that," he advised.



*C. Rajagopalachari and C.N. Annadurai*

Amirthalingam endorsed what Perum Chithiranan said. "Do as Aiya says," he said.

Perum Chithiranan, who later became an admirer of Pirapaharan, told me in an interview that he considered that meeting very productive because he and Amirthalingam were able to extract a promise from Pirapaharan and Uma Maheswaran that they would never attempt to kill each other.

"I am happy Pirapaharan honoured his undertaking. He withdrew his men from the vicinity of my house. He had not tried to kill Uma thereafter. I am sorry I could not meet Pirapaharan after that to convey him my gratitude," Perum Chithiranan said. He did not meet Pirapaharan again before his death.

In return for the undertaking not to kill Uma, Pirapaharan also laid a condition. Uma Maheswaran could have his own group, but he should never claim himself to be the LTTE leader.

Seven months after a fruitful stay in Madurai, Pirapaharan jumped bail and crossed over to Jaffna on 16 February 1983. He did that with the consent of Nedumaran. The police knew that Pirapaharan had escaped to Jaffna, but they searched for him in Bangalore and Pondicherry, just to submit a report to the court.

Pirapaharan crossed over to Jaffna because his dream of founding an armed group like Subash Chandra Bose's INA was taking shape there.

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**Chapter 30. LTTE guerillas in action**

To be posted on February 11.

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