

# Pirapaharan

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## 7. The Cyanide Suicide

### Sivakumaran

The death of nine spectators during the closing ceremony of the Fourth International Tamil Research Conference ended all the efforts Sirimavo Bandaranaike government had been making in 1973 to pacify the Tamil United Front. The deaths pained the hearts and wounded the feelings of the Tamil people, youths the most.

Militant youths decided to take revenge and they selected Jaffna Mayor and SLFP Jaffna Organizer Alfred Duraiappah as the target. Duraiappah was close to Posts and Telecommunications Minister Chelliah Kumarasuriyar who had played a role in hindering the holding of the conference in Jaffna. Duraiappah aided him and was responsible for the non-availability of the Duraiappah Stadium for the closing ceremony of the conference.

Two militant group leaders, independent of each other, decided to assassinate Duraiappah. One of them was Sivakumaran, son of Ponnuthurai and Annalechuni of Urumpirai, a village famed for Tamil militancy. The other was Pirapaharan, then 19. Sivakumaran considered the police firing at the conference a personal affront. He was a leading member of the Volunteer Force, raised to assist the conduct of the conference of reputed Tamil scholars worldwide. For Pirapaharan, who was in Tamil Nadu when the conference took place, the ugly disruption of the conference and its ill-fated ending was an outrage of the Tamil culture, Tamil pride.

Sivakumaran, born into the family of a passionate Federal Party supporters, had his early schooling at Urumpirai Hindu College and his GCE Advanced Level studies at Jaffna Hindu College. He joined Kokkuvil Junior Technical College for his professional education, but dropped out in two months due to his militant activities. He joined the Tamil Students Union (TSU) in 1971, a year after its formation, but had taken to political violence the previous year when he placed a time bomb in Deputy Minister Somaweera Chandrasiri's car. Then in 1971 he threw a hand bomb at Duraiappah's car.

His colleagues and acquaintances speak of him with affection. Says Mavai Senathirajah;

**He was a very sensitive person. He always spoke about armed struggle. He argued that Federal Party should play the role of an independence movement and it should form an armed wing to carry on an armed struggle.**

Sivakumaran's model for the independence struggle was Bangladesh. There, Mujibur Rehman's Awami League took forward the independence struggle and armed groups the armed struggle. Rudhramoorthy Cheran says;

**He would discuss all night the need for an armed struggle, how it should be conducted and the relationship that needed to be built between the political and armed wings.**

Sivakumaran teamed up with the Thangathurai- Kuttimani group for some time, but broke away and set up his own group, known as the Sivakumaran group. He was arrested in February 1972 for throwing the hand bomb at Duraiappah's car parked along First Cross Street. Duraiappah had walked up to the Jaffna Rest House and was having tea with Jaffna Magistrate Colin Mendis when Sivakumaran threw the bomb. The car was extensively damaged.

Sivakumaran was charged before the Jaffna magistrate, but C. Suntharalingam, his lawyer, objected to the case being heard by the Jaffna magistrate, a friend of Duraiappah. The case was transferred to the Mallakam magistrate who turned down the bail application ruling saying he had no authority to grant bail in such cases. Sivakumaran was released after some months due to lack of evidence. He was tortured during the investigation. It was unbearable, he later told his colleagues. He told them that he had decided not to get caught by the police again.

**I would rather die than get caught. It is better to die than betray your colleagues or movement to the police.**

Mavai Senathirajah, arrested in 1973, confirmed the severity of the torture. He said;

**Torture was very severe, unbearable. One night I was taken to an open ground and was beaten till I fainted. The torture team thought I was dead and left me there and went away. I was picked up by an army patrol.**

Sivakumaran found a way to escape police torture. He decided that it was better to commit suicide. He decided to carry with him a capsule of instant-killing poison cyanide. Sivakumaran thus originated the cyanide suicide culture.

Sivakumaran played a leading role in the Tamil Research Conference Volunteer Corps. He helped decorate Jaffna city and turn it into a cultural park in just three days. His contemporaries say he was sullen after Tamil Research Conference killings. He was itching for revenge. He told his friends that he would take revenge on two persons- Duraiappah and police officer Chandrasekera. His friends recall him vowing;

**These rascals who caused the death of nine innocent people should not go unpunished.**

## **Police Killing**

The Sirimavo Bandaranaike government, instigated by Kumarasuriyar, had interfered with the holding of the Fourth Tamil Research Conference from the beginning. Kumarasuriyar wanted to turn the prestigious international conference into a government show and earn for the government the good name of looking after the Tamils. He wanted Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike to open the conference in keeping with the precedent set in Malaysia and Tamil Nadu.

The inaugural conference was held in Kuala Lumpur in 1966. Tunku Abdul Rehman, prime minister of Malaysia, opened the conference. The second was held in Tamil Nadu, India, on 2 January 1968 which Indian president Zahir Hussain inaugurated. The third was held in Paris and was opened by the Secretary General of UNESCO. Sri Lanka offered to host the fourth conference.

The Sri Lanka branch of The International Association for Tamil Research held a meeting in April 1973 in Colombo to elect the Conference Organizing Committee. The Sri Lanka branch president, Dr. H. W. Thambiah, presided. He moved from the Chair that, in keeping with the precedent set earlier, the prime minister should inaugurate the conference. He was supported by the members of the Mutpokku Eluthalar sangam (Progressive Writers Society), the group controlled by the Communist Party. The majority of the participants preferred to hold the conference in Jaffna, the cultural capital of the Sri Lankan Tamils. Kumarasuriyar loyalists, aware of the anti-government mood then prevailing in Jaffna, walked out accusing the organizers of trying to make the conference a Tamil United Front affair. After that Kumarasuriyar induced the government machinery to put road blocks in the way of the organizers, including refusal to grant visas to some Indian researchers. Permission to use the Veerasingham Hall and for the use of loudspeakers were granted only three days before the beginning of the conference.

The government's opposition, especially Kumarasuriyar's efforts to block it from being held in Jaffna, was taken by the Jaffna youths as a challenge to them. They rose in unison to make the conference a success. They decorated the whole of Jaffna in the traditional Tamil style. Banana trees were tied to every electric lamp post and between them were strung *mavilai thoranam* (mango and tender coconut leaves). Welcome banners were strung at every road junction. Jaffna town wore a festive look.

Indian and foreign researchers were thrilled by the festive atmosphere. Professor Naina Mohammed, a Tamil scholar from Trichi, Janarthanam and some others who called on Thanthai Chelva at his Kankesanthurai home to pay their respects commented:

**Sir, we did not witness such enthusiasm in Tamil Nadu. People of Jaffna, we feel, are more enthusiastic.**

Thanthai Chelva replied;

**Jaffna people are more emotional about their language and culture. That is because, I feel, they feel threatened.**

The conference commenced on January 3 and concluded on January 9. It was a highly intellectual exercise and entry to the various sessions held mainly at the Veerasingham Hall and Timmer Hall was limited to researchers and academics. The concluding ceremony on January 10 was open to the public. The organizers booked the Duraiappah Stadium for the function. Crowd gathered from the afternoon, but the organizers found the gates of the stadium locked. Guards said the doors were locked on the orders of the mayor, Alfred Duraiappah, and they would open the doors only if the mayor instructed them to do so. All efforts to trace Duraiappah failed. He had gone into hiding.

In desperation the organizers decided to hold the meeting opposite the Veerasingham Hall. A stage was hurriedly erected in front of the hall and the crowd asked to sit on the ground opposite, leaving the Kankesanthurai road free. The milling crowd of over 10,000 overflowed onto the road. Jaffna Traffic Inspector Senathirajah who came along that road from Jaffna town was stopped by the volunteers who requested him to turn back and use the Clock Tower Road. They told him politely that it would not be proper for a vehicle to pass that way when foreign guests were addressing the audience. Inspector Senathirajah turned back and went to the police station through the alternate route.

A while later Sergeant Walter Perera of Jaffna Traffic Police came on his mobile rounds from Jaffna town and was told the same thing. He went back and reported the matter to his superior, Inspector Nanayakkara, who complained to Assistant Superintendent of Police Chandrasekera. The time was about 8.30pm.

Chandrasekera went to the Veerasingham with a truck-load of riot squad police who carried cane wicker shields and batons. Professor Naina Mohammed of Trichi Jameel Mohammed College, an erudite Tamil scholar, was then delivering his address. The people were spell-bound by his chaste Tamil and flawless oratory. Pin drop silence prevailed. Every thing was orderly and disciplined. Chandrasekera, through a loud hailer, asked the people to disperse. Then he ordered the heavy booted policemen to get off the truck. They jumped onto the road and took up attacking positions behind the truck. Chandrasekera ordered the truck to drive forward and the policemen to march behind the truck. Volunteers begged the police not to disrupt the meeting. Police replied with a fierce attack with their batons.

Police fired tear gas shells and most of them fell among the crowd. One fell near the stage. Prof S.Vithiananthan, the president of the conference, fell unconscious. Speakers on the platform were blinded by the tear gas. Policemen then fired into the air using live bullets. One struck an electric wire, snapping it. The live wire fell on the fleeing crowd. Seven persons were electrocuted. They died on the spot. Two of the several people injured died later. The Fourth Tamil Research Conference ended in confusion, a tragedy which the Tamils never forgave.

They would also never forgive the manner in which the government acted after the tragedy. The Prime Minister declined to condemn the police action. She justified the police action saying that the crowd started the attack. Chandrasekera, the officer, and his men were promoted. When pressure mounted, the government ordered a magisterial investigation. It was conducted by K. Palakiddnar, the magistrate of Jaffna, but the government failed to implement Palakidnar's recommendations.

Tamils lost their faith in the police and the judiciary. The Citizen Committee of Jaffna, a non-governmental organization, arranged for an impartial inquiry. The three-member committee comprised retired Supreme Court Judges O. L. de Krester and V. Manickavasagar and former Bishop Rev. Sabapathy Kulendran. In their report released in March 1974 the committee blamed the police for the attack.

Youths writhed with anger. They vowed revenge. Sivakumaran in Jaffna and Pirapaharan in Chennai violently advocated vengeance. They argued that the Tamil Research Conference disruption proved again the need for an armed resistance. They identified three men as their targets- Kumarasuriyar, Duraiappah and Chandasekera, in that order. Contemporaries say Sivakumaran had told them that he would kill Chandrasekera first as he caused the death of nine innocent civilians.

The Thamil Youth Forum (TYF) organized protests against the police. It declared February 4, Independence Day, as the Day of Prayer and Remembrance. It organized a fast at Muniappar Temple, close to the scene of the killing and appealed to the people to hold memorial services in all Hindu temples and Christian churches. It called on the students to boycott classes the previous day, February 3, as independence day was a public holiday.

Students boycotted schools on February 3 despite the threats by the police.

On independence day, Jaffna was decked with black flags. Youths had hoisted one on the top of Jaffna Clock Tower. Police were annoyed by it. They assaulted passersby and got it removed. They went to the Jaffna market, attacked shop owners and tore the black flags they had hoisted. A nasty situation developed.

From then, shopkeepers and members of the general public in Jaffna were forced to obey conflicting orders from the boys, as the militants were called, and the police. Boys would order the closing of shops and armed police would go round ordering them to open them. A shopkeeper, Mylvaganam, encapsulated the situation thus: We loved the boys and we obeyed their orders willingly. Then the police comes and orders that we open the shops. We hated the police.” The stage has thus been set for duel administration. Confrontation between the youths and the police was developing

Sivakumaran made two assassination attempts after the Tamil Research conference tragedy. His first attempt was to shoot Chandrasekera. Sivakumaran and a few of his group ambushed Chandrasekera near Kailasanathar Temple. They blocked his jeep. Sivakumaran opened the door and fired at Chandrasekera. The revolver refused to fire. It was locally made. Chandrasekera jumped out, but Sivakumaran and his friends had bolted. In his second attempt Sivakumaran waylaid Duraiappah’s car at Ponnalai Bridge. It was also a failure.

### Collective Pledge

The police went all out to arrest Sivakumaran. He found his movement restricted; his activities curbed. He decided to escape to Tamil Nadu for some time. He needed cash. He asked two leading Tamil politicians for assistance. They promised but failed to deliver. Sivakumaran was frustrated. He told his colleagues: These people know only to talk. They do not act.

Sivakumaran decided to act. He planned to rob the Kopay branch of the People’s Bank. On 5 June 1974 Sivakumaran and his men went to the bank soon after it commenced business. Their plan was to shoot the police on guard outside the bank, force their way in, herd the officials into a room and rob the cash. Sivakumaran fired two shots at the police. He erred. His bullets went astray. The police gave chase. Sivakumaran ran through the red-earthed farm, but the police almost caught him. He plucked the cyanide capsule hanging from his neck and swallowed it. .

Police took the unconscious boy to Jaffna hospital. News spread instantaneously. This is how a GCE Advanced Level student at Urmpirai Hindu College described the situation:

**We were in our class when the news reached us. We were excited. An old boy of our college had sacrificed his life for the sake of Mother Tamil. We sped in our bicycles to the Jaffna Hospital when school closed. A huge crowd had already gathered there. Most of them were students. We were told in the evening that he was dead. We cried.**

Jaffna cried. The entire Jaffna peninsula cried. All Sri Lankan Tamils cried. It was a supreme sacrifice. An emotional wave swelled among the Tamil community.

Many houses in the peninsula hoisted black flags, shops pulled their shutters and pamphlets were issued eulogizing Sivakumaran’s heroism. The funeral was held on 7 June. An unprecedented crowd queued up in his house to pay

their homage. Seven youths sliced their fingers and placed *iraththa thilagam* (pottu of blood) on the deceased's forehead and vowed to sacrifice their lives for Mother Tamil. Hundreds of youths followed. Sivakumaran had created an environment of '*uyir thiyagam* (life-sacrifice).

Students took control of the funeral. They wanted to take the body to Jaffna Hindu College where Sivakumaran did his GCE Advanced Level to enable the student community to pay its last respects. Police refused permission and students became boisterous and wanted to defy the police ban. Elders intervened and avoided a clash between the police and the students.

Independent estimates place the crowd at around 15,000, the biggest at a funeral in Jaffna.

Amirthalingam, the leader of the Federal Party, delivered an emotional and stirring oration. Said he:

**Thamby Sivakumaran had made the supreme sacrifice for the sake of the Tamil people. His is a heroic act. Though I differ with him in the violent method he advocated and practiced to achieve the objective of getting for the Tamil people their birthright, I bow my head to him for his commitment and dedication.**



Youths were worked up. They lined up before Sivakumaran's body when it was laid on the funeral pyre and took the collective pledge;

**In the name of Sivakumaran, in the name of his soul and body we undertake to continue the struggle to gain independence for Tamils, and until we gain that we will not retreat or rest.**

Tamils eulogize Sivakumaran as the most loved and respected freedom fighter and call him Eelam's Bhagat Singh. The LTTE, in its **Diary of Combat (1984)** describes Sivakumaran as;

**An outstanding freedom fighter and a forerunner of armed resistance.**

Tamils have accepted Sivakumaran as the first martyr in the armed struggle. His death anniversary is observed by the Tamils as Manavar Eluchchi Nal - Students' Day of Uprising. It was organized by the LTTE on the orders of Pirapaharan, who is keen in acknowledging the contribution of others to the Tamil Freedom Struggle. At the start it was observed on Sivakumaran's death anniversary day, June 5. Since 1996 Students' Day has been shifted to June 6 as June 5 is the World Environment Day. It has been observed since 1993 in a restricted manner in the areas under LTTE control. In 2003 it was observed in the entire north-eastern province.

A bronze statute, a defiant youth with his clinched fist outstretched and dangling a broken chain, was erected in Sivakumaran's honor in 1975 in his birthplace, Urumpirai. It was declared open by one of the founder members of the Tamil Students Union, Muthukumaraswamy. The army destroyed the statue in 1977, but another was erected again a year later. The army destroyed it again in 1981. *Saturday Review* of 27 February 1982 has recorded an interesting conversation about the statue.

More than 50 soldiers broke into the house of Sivakumaran's parents on 28 January 1982 saying they were looking for the militants hiding in the house. They only found a broken piece of Sivakumaran's statue. "Whose statue is this?" the commanding officer asked Sivakumaran's

mother, Annalechumy.

“It’s the piece of the statue of my son, Sivakumaran,” she replied.

“Who brought it here?”

“Common people.”

“Where is he now?”

“He died on 5 June 1974”

Eight years after his death it was no wonder the military officer was ignorant about Sivakumaran. It is no wonder because even Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, members of her government and the police were insensitive to the feelings of the Tamil people.

This is the copy of the secret report Jaffna police sent Bandaranaike and on which she based her judgments. It was about Amirthalingam’s funeral oration. It said:

**We have a record of his speech at Sivakumaran’s funeral. In that he called that criminal a hero.**

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**[Chapter 8: First Military Operation](#)**

**Will be posted on: September 1**

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**Introduction Part 2**

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**Chapter 2: Going in for a revolver**

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