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Pirapaharan, Chapter 20

by T. Sabaratnam

(Volume 2)

Violence Brought to the Fore

Shift in Allegiance

1984 is a milestone in the Tamil freedom struggle. In that year, Tamils finally abandoned their faith in non-violence and peace talks. In that year, they shifted their allegiance from the 'non-violent leaders' to the 'violent boys.'

And as I noted in the last chapter, that switch was major contribution of the Sinhala leadership, particularly Jayewardene, to Sri Lankan history. They achieved a change in the Tamil mindset through manipulated state and mob violence. They attained that also by calculated burial of the Tamil democratic leadership headed by the TULF. State and private media aided and abetted that process. The media acted as the cheering squad, if not promoters. I witnessed that sad story, in silence and helplessness, working in their midst.

The passage of power from passive leadership to fiery youths is a historical transformation. I watched that occur. I saw angry youths shouting at TULF leaders, "Move away. You have got us enough beatings. Allow us to give them back."

This demand intensified after the April car bomb attack and the army's brute reply. Armed groups and the Tamil public realized for the first time that they had in their hands the power to push the police back into their stations and the army to their barracks. And within a year from that time they had accomplished this.

Tamil people were also incensed with the Colombo media, which justified army killings of civilians portraying such killings as a great victory for the security forces against the 'terrorists.' Colombo media never realized that it was assisting the transfer of power from mild democrats to fiercely committed armed militants.

Adaikala



Some of my colleagues and contemporaries who reported the April events with such thrill are now at the helm in the media field. I find with great pain and frustration that they are still treading the same destructive path.

Jaffna Naga Vihara, 2003

I invite them to glance through their coverage of the first car bomb explosion of 9 April 1984 in Jaffna, the army atrocities of the following day, and the destruction of Naga Vihara. The indiscriminate firing at the civilians and at the Catholic Church which damaged the statue of Jesus Christ, inflamed the feelings of the civilian population, particularly the Catholic flock in the coastal belt. They took revenge by destroying the Buddhist temple. The LTTE exploited the situation. It did not lead it. Kittu was there. He distributed grenades and petrol bombs.



I have given a brief sketch of the 9 April explosion and the events that followed in Chapter 15. I wrote that description of events after careful investigation. What Sinhala political leaders and journalists forget is that two proud races are involved in the ethnic conflict. You cannot please one race at the expense of another. When you do that, you hurt the other. It gets enraged. It becomes violent. The interest of Sri Lanka involves the interests of both races, their languages, their religions, their separate identities.

In my view, Jayewardene laid the foundation for a Tamil separate state in 1983. The July riots made the Tamils feel that they are a separate nation. The events of 1984 cemented that feeling. A young militant asked me when I visited Jaffna after the April killings, "Sinhala army fired at fleeing Tamils. Will it do it if the running persons were Sinhalese? Does that not denote the army regarded the Tamils their enemies? Does that not denote that the Tamils are a separate nation?" I had no answer.

By mid April 1984, Tamils had taken the hard decision. A group of youths from my village, Ariyalai, told me during the April New Year holidays, "Jayewardene is building his army. He will never give the Tamils their rights. We are going to fight." I felt from their tone their determination.

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This and the following chapters will relate the story of the result of their determination.

Five main armed groups were active in 1984. They were: LTTE, TELO, EPRLF, PLOTE and EROS. The leaders of those groups were: Pirapaharan, Sri Sabaratnam, Pathmanabha, Uma Maheswaran and Balakumar. The LTTE was the most active, followed by TELO and EPRLF. PLOTE and EROS were almost dormant.

The groups and their leaders differed in their philosophy, approach and strategy. Pirapaharan was intensely nationalist. He was building a well-knit, totally committed, loyal, fighting unit. He concentrated on the fighting quality of his men, discipline and on the acquisition of weapons. His weapons policy was: snatch as much as possible from the police and the army, get as much as possible from the Indians and buy weapons superior to them. He was always a step above the army and other armed groups.

Pirapaharan's strategy for mobilizing, as I pointed out in my first volume, was also different. He kept repeating: make use of the army to do your mobilization work. Provoke the army, they will attack the people, the people will rally behind you for protection. Pirapaharan has told his colleagues during discussions that that was the strategy leaders of all successful revolutions employed. He pointed out that that was the strategy the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) used. He told his colleagues that Israelis were the successful mobilizers for the PLO.



Kuttimani

TELO, after the murder of Kuttimani and Thangathurai at Welikada prison, had no strategy of its own. Sri Sabaratnam took instructions from RAW and the Indians. Pathmanabha was a Marxist. He argued that grassroots mobilization of peasants and workers through political education should precede armed struggle. He was against using the army for mobilization. That would hurt the people, he argued. The attacks staged by the EPRLF were mainly the work of a small group of active youths. The EPRLF had a large armoury. Uma Maheswaran, though he had the largest number of cadres, was almost inactive. He was talking about a national revolution of which the Tamil Eelam struggle would form a part. EROS had always been a debating group.

Second Jailbreak

Fighting back began in early May 1984. It started with the killing of police investigators. On 2 May Police Sergeant Navaratnam was shot by two youths at Point Pedro bus stand. He was investigating the activities of armed groups. Two days later Police Constable Subramaiah was killed. He had given information about Seelan's hideout to the army intelligence. Seelan alias Charles Anthony was Pirapaharan's deputy. He got himself shot when he was about to be captured by the army. Pirapaharan loved Anthony's courage so much that he named his eldest son after him.

The fight back intensified in June. It took the form of cash and weapon robberies, the killing of informants and anti-social elements and attacks on the police and the army. In that month the second jailbreak in Batticaloa and the attempt to kill Lalith Athulathmudali by placing a bomb at the Insurance Corporation took place. The government considered these events so important it told State Ministry Secretary Douglas Liyanage to hold special press conferences.

The fight back commenced with the Rs. 2 lakh robbery at the Bank of Ceylon branch of the Kankesanthurai Cement Factory. Four men armed with a revolvers rode in a Toyota van on 31 May pretending to purchase cement. They went to the bank, entered the cashier's cubicle pretending to cash a cheque, pushed the revolver to the cashier's chest and walked away with the cash, leaving the van behind.

And on the same 31 May night, Ramalingam Balasingham of Uduvil was tied to a lamppost and shot in his head. A note placed near him said he was an anti-social element. The *Daily News* that carried the story had a note to say that that was the 30th lamppost killing in the 4 to 5 week period.

Two armed men walked into the Ceylon Transport Board Kondavil Depot the next day, 1 June, and robbed cash and season tickets worth Rs. 75,000. .

On 2 June, the *Sun* carried the story of the robbery of Rs. 25,000 from a fuel filling station in the Sammanthurai area with the punchy headline 'Oily Raid.'

While others were busy with these small pinpricks aimed to upset the Jayewardene government and its army, Pirapaharan was active planning to repay his gratitude. He was planning from Tamil Nadu, where he then lived, the daring second Batticaloa jailbreak. He wanted to rescue Nirmala Nithiyananthan.

Nirmala was in the women's wing of the Batticaloa prison during the first jailbreak of 23 September 1983. Vamathevan, Thanthai Chelva's former driver was given the task of rescuing Nirmala. He forgot it in the rush. Her husband, Nithiyananthan, had escaped and had joined the LTTE in Chennai. He was appointed the editor of the LTTE's official monthly paper *Viduthalai Puligal*. Nithiyananthan was a former journalist at *Thinakaran* in Lake House before he joined Jaffna University as a lecturer in economics.

Pirapaharan was determined to unite the young couple. He owed Nirmala a special act of gratitude. She was arrested and detained by Capt. Sarath Munasinghe in 1982 under the Prevention of Terrorism Act for aiding, abetting and harbouring terrorists and withholding information. Her crime was that she nursed Seelan alias Charles Anthony, Pirapaharan's faithful and active colleague, who was wounded during the Chavakachcheri Police Station attack. Pirapaharan was determined to rescue her to show his gratitude.

Pirapaharan had to rescue her before the third week of June. The case against her had been listed for hearing by the Colombo High Court for June third week. She would be removed to Colombo before that. Pirapaharan planned the rescue operation with Paramadeva, one of the architects of the first jailbreak. Paramadeva was not a member of the LTTE when the first jailbreak took place. But he escaped with the Tiger group - Nithyananthan, Fr. Sinnarasa, Jeyakularajah and Jayathilakarajah. Paramadeva joined the LTTE after he reached Chennai.

Ramalingam Paramadeva was one of the pioneers of armed revolution in the Batticaloa district. He was a school student in 1975 when the Federal Party declared 22 May, the third anniversary of the Republic Day, a day of mourning and called for the boycott of the hoisting of the national flag in government institutions and schools. Paramadeva organized the boycott in his school. He was sacked.

Pushed out from the venue of democratic, non-violent protest he took to violent protest. Two years later, in 1977, he led a bomb attack. The police launched a search for him. That drove him underground. He founded Batticaloa's first armed group, Tamil Eelam Liberation Cobras (TELC) which came to be call the **Cobras**. Youth from Batticaloa district joined him. The group functioned within the Batticaloa district.

The Cobras indulged in acts of bomb throwing and robbery. In 1978 Paramadeva and his colleagues raided the Senkalady branch of the People's Bank. A police constable chased and grabbed him. They wrestled on the public road. Another policeman fired at him. Bullets pierced his right arm. Paramadeva was arrested and sentenced to eight years imprisonment in 1981. He narrowly survived the Welikada massacre and was transferred to the Batticaloa prison, from where he escaped.

Paramadeva took charge of implementing Pirapaharan's plan to rescue Nirmala. He and his men drove to the Batticaloa prison in two vehicles on 10 June 1984. Two of them were dressed as jail guards. One of them was dressed like a prisoner. The rest were in army uniform.

They reached the jail at 7.15 p.m. The 'jail guard' knocked at the outer gate. The guard on duty opened the gate slightly and peeped out. The 'jail guard' said they had brought a prisoner from Colombo and the guard opened the gate. The 'guards', the 'prisoner' and two 'soldiers' walked in.

The guard smelt something fishy and closed the gate. The Tigers overpowered the guards. They looked for the guard who carried the prison keys. He was missing because he had hidden. The Tigers broke open the second gate and ran to the women's wing. Nirmala was waiting for them. "I'm here," she shouted. The Tigers broke into her cell and they took her away. She was transported to Tamil Nadu. The government was shocked. Two jailbreaks in six months.

State Ministry secretary Douglas Liyanage held a special press conference the next evening, Monday 11 June 1984. He announced that a massive combined services operation had been launched to arrest the escapees. He said an intensive land and sea combing was on. The search was futile. A boat fitted with two outboard engines had rushed Nirmala to Tamil Nadu. The Tigers, in their first 'media event,' produced her before the press. She described her escape and the midnight sea flight as "thrilling and frightening."

Pirapa's Views on Intellectuals

Adele Balasingham was delighted when Pirapaharan told her that Nirmala would work with her. Adele says in her book, *The Will to Freedom*, she was thrilled at the thought that an English-speaking feminist would work with her. Adele suggested to Pirapaharan Nirmala be appointed the LTTE's women wing leader. Pirapaharan turned the suggestion down. He told Adele that Nirmala's perception of women's liberation was western and did not represent the view of Tamil women. He told Adele the conception of liberation by Tamil women was different. He told her the model of women's liberation acceptable to Tamil women should reflect the aspirations "masses of Tamil women could identify (themselves) with and embrace as their own."

Adele admits in her book that Pirapaharan's assessment was correct. She records, "the girls who were with us had difficulty in relating to and comprehending Nirmala's 'radicalism.' She was worlds apart from the village girls who had come to join the struggle and fight for their homeland and had no real idea of women's liberation, nor necessarily aspired for it."

Pirapaharan turned down Adele's suggestion for a second reason, too. He believes intellectuals do not fit into military machinery. They are self-centered. They think they know everything. They like to be independent. They do not obey. They argue and revolt. They will not allow anyone to do any work. They can be sympathizers and supporters, but could never be a cog in the fighting machine, he believes.

Pirapaharan also believes that intellectuals and others who join midway should not be incorporated into the fighting outfit. They should be given positions outside the military organization. Nithyananthan was appointed the editor of *Viduthalai Puligal*. He was told to get his articles passed by Baby Subramaniam (Ilankumaran). Nithyananthan was not happy about it and that was one of the reasons for his quitting the LTTE with Nirmala at the end of 1984. Nirmala just could not pull along with the rural girls. She turned into a severe critic. Pirapaharan stuck to his belief when he took in Balakumar, the EROS leader, and his deputy, Pararajasingham (Para), who joined the LTTE after disbanding their organization. He did not take them into the military organization. They have civil administrative jobs. Balakumar is the head of the planning division and Para heads the judiciary.



Balakumar 2004 (photo courtesy TamilNet)

The second jailbreak was the harbinger of LTTE's renewed activity. Five days after

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that, on 15 June 1984, the Tigers burnt the seaplane in which Navy Commander Asoka de Silva returned to Colombo after his visit to Karainagar Naval Camp. The light 4-seater sea craft developed engine trouble soon after it was airborne and the pilot landed near the coast of Parithiyadaippu, a village eight kilometers from the naval camp.

The Commander returned to the navy camp and four navy men were placed on guard. Three armed Tiger cadres chased them away and set fire to the craft.

Two EPRLF cadres performed a more daring act on the same day. They took a lorry at gunpoint and crashed it into a police jeep, injuring a sub-inspector and three constables. Two days later four armed youths robbed the maps from the Geography Department of the Jaffna University.

June ended with a daring attempt to kill National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali. A security officer, working for a private security firm employed by the Insurance Corporation, discovered the deadly bomb. He found it during a routine check carried out before the minister entered his office on the seventh floor. It was placed in the storeroom close to the toilet between the fifth and the sixth floors. The guard pulled out the trigger and took it to the chief security officer.

'Thank God it was discovered in time. It was the most powerful bomb ever found in Sri Lanka. It had 45 sticks of gelignite. Had it exploded half of the 14-storey building would have collapsed," Douglas Liyanage told a special press briefing.

Liyanage said the bomb was placed directly below Athulathmudali's room. Athulathmudali occupied the seventh and eighth floors, with his office in the seventh and the conference room above.

July was full of minor attacks, round-ups and killings of anti-social elements. The only unusual event was the death of a soldier who went collecting firewood for the Pooneryn Army camp. He stepped on a trap gun.

Meenampakkam Blast

Confrontation with the armed forces intensified in August. But before that, on 2 August, a plan to blast the Katunayake airport misfired. The plan was hatched by Panagoda Maheswaran. He was born in 1955 to a well-known business family from Pungudutivu. Maheswaran's father, Thambipillai, owned a chain of stores, including the popular vegetarian hotel Dawalahiri at Maradana. His family sent him to Queen's College, London University where he did a degree in civil engineering. He returned to Sri Lanka in 1980 and joined the GUES and then EROS. He worked with a group at Trincomalee and planned a failed bank robbery in Kinniya. He was arrested and detained at the high security Panagoda Army Camp. He cut the iron window bars of the room in which he was kept and escaped in early 1983. That daring escape earned him the appellation Panagoda and an aura of respectability and admiration among Tamil youths. He was arrested on a tip-off from a Muslim house at Peloyagoda and detained at Welikade.

The 5 feet 11 inch tall and well-built Maheswaran witnessed the prison killing of the first day, 25 July, and prepared his colleagues to resist if they were attacked. Improvised weapons were kept at hand and the collection of the curry gravy was done on his suggestion. His colleagues who escaped the second massacre of 27 July speak glowingly of the bold fight he put up. He was one of the leaders who planned the first Batticaloa jailbreak. He cut models of handguns which the Sri Lankan media mistook for real ones and reported that handguns had been smuggled into the prison.

Panagoda Maheswaran stayed back in Batticaloa and founded the Tamil Eelam Army (TNA). He led the robbery of the Kattankudi People's Bank in January 1984, the biggest bank robbery in Sri Lanka until then. Six young men led by Maheswaran walked into the bank at 9 am when it opened for business, took the manager hostage, herded the other employees into a room and cleaned up the safe vault. The bloodless operation netted for them Rs. 36 million in gold and jewellery and Rs. 240,000 in cash. But the security forces which launched a massive crackdown managed to recover a portion of the gold and jewellery which had been wrapped in polythene bags and buried in tins in the back of the house in which they lived.

Maheswaran escaped to Jaffna with part of the booty and then to Tamil Nadu. With that money, he set up a training camp on the Tamil Nadu - Kerala border and a transit camp at Vedaraniyam. His fame attracted about 400 youths and he set up a TNA camp at Vadamarachchi. He set up a motorcycle brigade in which his cadres, known as Panagoda's boys, rode fast dressed in similar safari suits.

Panagoda Maheswaran's urge was to do something spectacular and shocking. He shifted to Chennai, rented a house at Neelankarai, a suburb, enrolled at the Madras Flying Club and underwent a course as a pilot. His ambition was to charter an aircraft, load it with bombs and drop them over selected targets in Colombo.

During training, Maheswaran changed his mind and modified the plan. He decided to blast the Katunayake airport. The change was mainly due to his newfound Indian Tamil friend, Saranavabhavan, a member of the flying club. They worked out a plan to send two suitcases packed with explosives, timed to explode after the suitcases were loaded into the Air Lanka carrier to London and Paris. Maheswaran collected a group of people who could assist him. They were: Vikneswara Rajah, a former officer of the Sri Lanka Customs; Thambirajah who contested the DDC elections in Batticaloa as a TULF candidate; Chandrakumar, an Indian police constable working at the Meenambakkam Airport Security; Vijayakumar, a peon at the Air Lanka Office at the airport and Loganathan, a porter at the airport.

Panagoda Maheswaran manufactured the bombs in his Neelankarai home. He packed them into two suitcases. He bought a ticket for Air Lanka flight UL-122 from Chennai to Colombo on 2 August. He chose that flight because the Air Lanka Boeing 737 aircraft departs from Chennai at 21.50 hours and arrives at Katunayake at 22.50 hours. In an hour, it proceeds to Male, the capital of the Maldives. Two other Air Lanka aircrafts, one to Gatwick/London and the other to Paris,

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normally stand at that time on the tarmac loading baggage. The flight for Charles de Gaulle airport via Muscat and Vienna was scheduled to depart at 23. 30 hours, while the flight for Gatwick, via Dubai, Zurich was scheduled to leave at 23.50 hours.

The blasts were timed for 23.00 hours when the three aircrafts stand quite near each other on the apron. Singapore Airlines Boeing 707 would also be there at that time. The blast, if it had occurred at Katunayake, would have destroyed three Air Lanka aircrafts and the Singapore Airlines craft, the tarmac and portions of the airport building,

By a quirk of fate, the bombs exploded at 22.52 hours at the Meenampakkam airport. Panagoda Maheswaran had purchased the ticket in the name Kathiresan. He checked in at the Air Lanka counter at 20.10 hours. Porter Loganathan carried the heavy suitcases past the customs without any checking. Vikneswara Rajah had made the arrangements. The suitcases weighed 35 kilos excess and Maheswaran paid the excess charge of 300 Indian rupees. Maheswaran waited till the suitcases were taken to the cargo loading area and slipped out.

Vijayakumar of the airport security then performed his part. He removed the baggage tags which read CMB meaning Colombo and tied the one that read LGW on one suitcase and the one on which CDG was written on the other. LGW denoted Gatwick airport and CDG Charles de Gaulle airport. That was to assure that the suitcases would be loaded onto the Gatwick and Paris-bound planes at Katunayake.

Maheswaran did not leave the airport. He waited with the public and had an eye on the suitcases. They were not loaded into the aircraft. They were left at the cargo terminal. Then the airport announcement shook him. "Attention please. Passenger Kathiresan bound to Colombo, please identify your packages." It was repeated a few minutes later. The aircraft took off without the suitcases as its owner had failed to identify them.

The suitcases were moved back to the Air Lanka office. The customs, suspecting smuggling, sent them to the left-luggage counter till some one claimed them. The transit passenger lobby outside was crowded with Sri Lankans, mainly women, who were waiting for the connecting flight to Bombay. They were on their way to Abu Dhabi.

Maheswaran realized the danger. He panicked. He went to Guindy, where one of his friends lived. He telephoned the airport customs and told them to remove the suitcases from the building. He warned them that there were bombs in them. He was taken to be prankster. Maheswaran telephoned again. Airport officials started debating whether that was a ruse by the smugglers. Maheswaran's third call was taken seriously. Two officials tried to pull the suitcases out of the building.

Then the bombs exploded. The time was 22.52 hours.

The explosion caused a catastrophe. Thirty-three persons were killed and 27 injured. The dismembered head of a woman was thrown many meters away and a leg got struck to the ceiling's iron frame. The entire concrete hood of the arrival lounge collapsed, pinning down all those who waited there.

Twenty-four Sri Lankans died, some of them blown to bits and burnt beyond recognition. Eighteen of them were women and six men. Two of the dead were Customs officials.

The story reached Colombo that night itself. Jayewardene, Athulathmudali and their propaganda machinery sprung into action. They considered the tragedy a propaganda boon. They have got the opportunity to push India into a defensive position. The information the Sri Lankan intelligence service had amassed about the training facilities India provided to Tamil armed groups had been put to maximum use. Newspapers pointed an accusing finger at India. 'You are training the terrorists and you have suffered from it,' editorialists preached.

Jayewardene rushed a message to Indira Gandhi condemning the carnage. In it he had this dig, "Whilst sympathizing with the families of all those who have died or have been injured as a result of this blast, it is clear that we who are committed to a democratic way of life and to a democratic process in finding solution to problems must cooperate to fight terrorism which has become an ugly monster challenging the very foundations of the international community and its values."

Indira Gandhi replied, "I condemn as much as you this outrage. Both our governments should take all steps to prevent the recurrence of all such forms of mindless violence."

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran was highly disturbed. He called the bomb explosion "a ghastly act committed by cruel minded persons."

No group claimed responsibility. Tamil armed groups and India played down the incident because of the embarrassment it caused them. They tried to show that that was the work of Israeli intelligence agency Mossad.

But the Tamil Nadu police did its job. Policemen raided Maheswaran's Neelankarai home and seized a similar bomb. They arrested Maheswaran and later Vickneswara Rajah, Thambirajah, and seven other Indian Tamils. They were charged before the courts in March 1985. The three Sri Lankans - Maheswaran, Vickneswara Rajah and Thambirajah were released on bail, They jumped bail. Five Indians - Saravanabhavan, Vijaya Kumar, Loganathan, Chandrakumar and Balasubramanian were awarded life sentences.

Panagoda Maheswaran fled to Bangalore and was arrested in 1998. His and the TNA's contribution to the Tamil freedom struggle was negligible. His talent and efforts had been wasted.

Jayewardene and Athulathmudali derived the maximum propaganda mileage from the Meenampakkam blast. That did not last long. The next few days turned the table against them. August 1984 was a major turning point in the Tamil freedom

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struggle.

In that month, Pirapaharan made the first major change in his armed struggle. He announced his forces would no longer do hit and run attacks. Their focus would be sustained guerrilla attack. This is what he announced:

We are switching over from our tactic of hit and run to a sustained guerrilla campaign.

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Chapter 21: Sustained Guerrilla Campaign

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