

Massacres of Muslims and what it means for the Tamils

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The historic role of the minorities

The Three bills of 1948/49 which deprived the Hill Country(Indian) Tamils of the vote and virtually consigned them to serfdom were supported by most MPs from the two main remaining minority communities - the Ceylon Tamils and the Muslims. Had it not been for this betrayal of a fellow minority community, the UNP government of the day would have been hard put to justify and secure the passage to these bills. Ironically the strongest and intellectually incisive opposition to these bills came from the mostly Sinhalese Left opposition. This says much about the nature of the state and the leadership of the minorities that remains true to this day. The significance of the event itself was largely ignored, thus passing lightly over a portent of today's state of affairs. Most Ceylon Tamils would date the beginning of evils to 1956(the Sinhala Only Act) or the early 70s(standardisation & the 1972 constitution). This signifies a dangerous self-centredness.

The oppressive character of the state implicit in the bills of 1948/49 was not simply a problem for the minorities. But as recent tragedies have shown, it was one for the vast majority of Sinhalese themselves. As the first victims of the bankruptcy of Sinhalese chauvinist politics, the minorities had a historic liberating role on behalf of all the people of Ceylon.

The character of the minority leadership was one of sycophancy towards the Sinhalese state combined with a mafia type approach at home, using a mixture of patronage and thuggery, going to great lengths to preserve their local authority. The first task of liberation was to expose such leaders, and unite the minorities behind common secular values and liberating goals. Why did this not happen? Why, instead, did the leading Tamil group take to destroying a fellow minority, the Muslims, besides a significant section of its own community? Why a repetition of the folly of 1948/49 in this most obnoxious form? As Tamils it is imperative that we answer these questions and distance the Tamil cause from the deeds of those who act in our name.

The politics of servility and the drift to fascism

Ultimately, whether or not a politics is liberating is judged, not by slogans, as provocative and defiant as they may be, but by whether it empowers the people and gives them dignity and control over their lives. If not this politics is bound to lead to tragedy and servility- towards the state, external powers or both. Indeed, slogans with regard to the problems of Hill Country Tamils, Muslims and the depressed castes have been raised in Tamil politics. But in action these were only a skin deep. Our history reveals that any earnestness did not go beyond immediate political gain. The TULF's resolution for a separate Tamil state in the North-East in 1976, and hitching the nationalist bandwagon, in the popular mind, to irrelevant symbols such as the Kingdom of Jaffna and those pertaining to the imperial Cholas, shewed gross insensitivity. These symbols are not as harmless as they may seem. They pandered to Jaffna, high-caste complacency. The Eelam resolution itself weakened the cause of the minorities by leaving the Hill Country Tamils out in the cold. When Muslims, Eastern Tamils and depressed castes shewed a lack of enthusiasm for the Tamil cause as articulated by the Jaffna elite, which was reflected in the TULF's electoral fortunes, they were treated with suspicion.

Denigrative clichés about them were allowed to gain ground and seep into the consciousness of people unchecked. The state encouraged and used these differences to further its ends. But it was precisely the task of a liberating politics to elevate the consciousness of people so as to overcome the state's machinations. A politics that united the minorities had to be worked for. What happened was that we put forward a set of narrow, emotive slogans, void of content and positively alienating to many, and did no work towards understanding and coming to terms with the feelings of others. When others did not fall in line, we expressed surprise and treated them as traitors.

We need not look far to understand today's attitudes to Muslims. The unwritten history of caste oppression in Jaffna, as Sinnathamby Velayutham points out in his column in the 'Thayagam', was far more violent and humiliating than is admitted. The same writer cites the cases of K. Daniel, of the Mass Front for Removal of Untouchability. Since 1966 the Front had become a force to be reckoned with and had publicly opposed the JVP. In 1971, the time of the first JVP insurrection, following a staged explosion, Daniel was pointed out to the police as a JVP activist. Daniel was held for a year and released without charges. There was little, if any, voicing of public indignation that such an important Tamil was the victim of caste motivated treachery.

M.C. Subramaniam was one of those described a traitor worthy of an abject death from a TULF(FP) platform in 1972 by Kasi Anandan, now the LTTE's poet laureate. Subramaniam, then leader of the depressed castes was no traitor. He had been one of the more service oriented MPS who did not use his position to enrich himself, not even by accepting gifts. A humble bicycle remained his mode of transport. Though it was predominantly the high castes who went to him for favours, few cared to ask him why he felt as he did.

The LTTE today wears the insignia of the main strand in Tamil nationalist politics. Its slogans have convinced some foreign observers that it stands for caste emancipation. But its real position on the matter is a pointer to its attitude to Muslims. It was commonplace for LTTE supporters to campaign against the EPRLF by associating it with the low castes. When Varadarajaperumal was chief minister of the North-East, posters appeared in Jaffna using his Indian Tamil origins to denigrate him. The LTTE never condemned these and ask for criticisms to be based only on the actions of individuals or organisations. It was, to say the least, happy to stay silent and use anything that served its short term ends. It was this fundamentally weak cause, that made a virtue of insensitivity, duplicity and treachery, that turned to massacring Muslims. The same degenerate social values of the Tamil elite, which insulated them from feeling a sense of moral indignation or remorse at children being dragooned into becoming engines of death, and the sordid history of caste oppression, now made it easy to rationalise massacres of Muslim women and children.

The LTTE and the Muslims

The LTTE has consistently denied massacring Muslims. In the 7th Aug 1992 issue of 'Kalathil', the LTTE journal published from Paris, it has an unsigned article with the title 'The Tamil Liberation Struggle and the Muslims of Tamil Ealam'. It gives a version of events with several gaps. Massacres of Muslims for instance are not mentioned. Muslims are collectively accused of ganging up against the Tamils, first with the Sri Lankan state, then with 'Indian imperialism' as represented by the IPKF and since June 1990 again with the Sri Lankan state. The article repeatedly stresses that (the vast majority of) Muslims collectively regard Tamils

as their enemies and have indulged in atrocities against them. It is implied that whole Muslim villages acted as informers to the forces. The article concludes:

"It seems that the Muslim people believe that their freedom, identity and dignity will be(best) protected by(their) destroying Tamils... What we Tigers wish to say(ask) here is (simply) this:

WHO IS OUR ENEMY? WHO IS OUR FRIEND?.....

"The Muslims who are a part of the Tamil Nation are not enemies of the Tamils. They are meant to live in unity with the Tamils. The real enemies of the Muslims are Sinhalese chauvinism and Indian expansionism. They must realise this truth and repent their feeling of enmity towards Tamils. Their future lies in unity with the Tamils".

The context of the article leaves no doubt that this is the authentic position of the Tigers. The Tigers have frequently made it clear that there is only one treatment for enemies and traitors. (See for instance p6 of `Kalathil', 19.9.92.) Notwithstanding denials, it is clearly official Tiger policy to massacre Muslims, including women and children. The old line of the Jaffna Tamil elite towards other minorities, that while they have been lenient, generous and considerate, others have been treacherous and ungrateful, has passed unchanged to the Tigers. This is in fact the mirror image of the Sinhalese chauvinist line as regards Tamils.

Such stereotyping of Muslims or any group of people runs contrary to the whole spirit of the liberation struggle, and is as execrable as Sinhalese communalists subjecting the Tamils to collective violence. The reality within the Muslim community is as complex and variegated as in any other community. Whether the forces that gain leadership ascendancy are edifying or destructive depends much on historical circumstances and anxieties. For the Tamils to see mere treachery in Muslim homeguard violence, is very similar to the stance of Sinhalese chauvinists as regards the Tamil militancy. They closed their eyes to July 1983 and all that preceded it and saw the Tamil militancy merely as an Indian ploy. When Sinhalese communalists insisted that we Tamils were Sri Lankans, we felt strongly that we had to say NO! How is it that many fail to understand why many Muslims, depressed castes and Eastern Tamils say NO to the Jaffna elite vision of the Tamil Nation? The unity of the peoples of Ceylon has to be worked for by a politics of understanding and healing. The same is true for the unity of Tamil speaking peoples.

Recent contacts of the UTHR(Jaffna) with Muslims in the East leaves me convinced that the overwhelming majority of Muslims desire normal, peaceful and friendly relations with Tamils, and disapprove of the actions of home guards. The same holds for the Tamils, who have little control over the LTTE. Both communities are trapped in a politics of permanent conflict and permanent destruction. One set of killers to legitimise their power over a people, need to endanger them by propping up their likes among other peoples.

The LTTE's version of events

There can be no case for unleashing murder on a community. But in appearing to make a case the Tigers advance certain claims and give their own version of events. How true these are will be a pointer to whether their politics is one of strength or one of deceit, desperation and destruction. The LTTE claims that Muslims were first agents of the Sri Lankan state, then

of India and the IPKF, and then from June 1990, again of the Sri Lankan state. Let us see what really transpired.

There have been simmering tensions between Muslims and Tamils in certain areas of the East, as was to be expected. In many places, such as Eravur and Nintavur, there are no records of tensions. Muslim youth were part of the Tamil militant struggle in the early 80s. In the mid 80s when sections of Tamil militants started becoming rough in their dealings with Muslims and extortionate demands were made, the state used this to foment communal violence, particularly in 1984 & 85. Nevertheless the Muslims largely went along with militant demands, maintained relations and paid 'taxes'.

There had as mentioned been friction between some neighbouring Muslim and Tamil communities which in the normal course of events erupted and subsided without leaving permanent scars. In 1984 special units of the Sri Lankan constabulary and agents were inducted into the East to foment violence with a view to making these local differences permanent. Attacks on Tamils were led by agents of the state. The worst attacks were Karaitivu and Navatkudah, near Kattankudy with sizeable damage to Tamil life and property. The second attack was led by a police armoured car. Agents had spread rumours and had announced that Muslims in Kattankudy were about to be attacked.

But it was precisely the task of a liberation struggle to understand the roots of fear and suspicion between communities and politically isolate those few who thrive on these.

That Muslims were collectively agents of the IPKF is totally unhistorical. Owing to the past conduct of the Sri Lankan forces, it was the Tamils more than the Muslims who welcomed the IPKF. Following the outbreak of hostilities between the LTTE and the IPKF, it was in the East the Muslims who suffered most. About 40 Muslims were killed in the first IPKF reprisals in the East in November 1987. The LTTE fired at an IPKF convoy and had run away (deliberately according to local observers) through the Muslim village of Oddaimavady. Up to a 100 Muslims were killed at Kattankudy during December 1987 in LTTE reprisals, following a few individuals attacking the local LTTE agent.

When it came to be believed that the IPKF was there to stay, leaders from BOTH communities co-operated with the IPKF. But because of the attitudes of pro-Indian Tamil militant groups towards Muslims, many Muslims helped the LTTE. The LTTE gained Muslim recruits and Muslims were then the mainstay of the LTTE's survival in the East. When the IPKF withdrew from most parts of the East in late 1989, the main victims of LTTE killings were Tamils. BUT friction with Muslims increased as the LTTE pushed its brand of authorisationism. Greater discomfort developed as Muslim leaders politely reminded the LTTE of its pledges made to visiting Muslim representatives in India during 1987, promising autonomy for Muslim religious and cultural life. But taxes or contributions were faithfully paid.

The outbreak of the war in June 1990 followed the LTTE murdering over a hundred surrendered Muslim policemen along with their Sinhalese and vanishing. Anger among local Muslims was used by the government and Muslim hoodlums were mobilised in anti-Tamil violence. Even so the Batticaloa district remained calm, and Muslim traders continued feeding Tamil civilians who were cut off. With deliberate calculation the LTTE destabilised the

Batticaloa District with massacres of Muslims in Kurukkalmadam, Kattankudy and Eravur from 12th July to 12th August 1990.

At this time there were a large number of Muslim cadre in the LTTE, including a hundred from Eravur. At first the LTTE told them that the Muslim civilians were massacred by the Sri Lankan forces. But doubts began to emerge. It later transpired that even some Muslim families who had been close to the LTTE and had materially supported them had been eliminated willy nilly. The Muslim cadre also feared that the LTTE would next act against them. Most of them deserted and surrendered to the Sri Lankan forces. Some who too afraid to surrender and remained in hiding, were handed over to the SL forces and, it is believed, were eliminated.[UTHR(J), Report No 8, Ch 4]. It is ironical who should accuse whom of treachery.

The government playing the LTTE's game, mobilised Muslim hoodlums in the Batticaloa District, as well, in violence against Tamils. Given that the Srilankan State is what it is, this was the case of a bankrupt 'liberation group' preying on fomenting destruction and making the people powerless for its survival.

Against the LTTE's unsustainable claim that Muslims were collectively agents of the Sri Lankan and Indian states, let us examine the LTTE's own performance. Having weakened the Tamil struggle militarily by wiping out other groups in 1986, the LTTE was desperately looking for Indian patronage. The LTTE then boasted that it had given India a foothold in Sri Lanka ('The Broken Palmyra', vol II, chapter 6). There is testimony from other militant leaders as well as circumstantial factors to suggest that the LTTE carried out the Anuradhapura massacre of April 1985 at the behest of the Indian RAW, in a bid to become India's favourite (Time, April 1989) Then later as Sri Lankan patriots working closely with the Premadasa government from April 1989 - June 1990, the LTTE with the connivance of the Sri Lankan forces cracked down on Tamil and Muslim opposition, however passive, through murder and imprisonment. The roots of treachery and deception lay elsewhere. The LTTE was far more prominently what it accused its victims of. This brings us to the question, why really did the LTTE turn its guns on the Muslims?

Doomed by the nemesis of violence

As pointed out at the beginning, the strength of a politics is not judged by its slogans, Prabaharan's Suthumalai speech, by its capacity to shoot or intimidate opponents, the length of its hit lists, or by its ability to frustrate and destroy. Strength only lays in giving the people sound human values, dignity, confidence in themselves individually and in their collective strength. A politics that is weak is driven to servility by the logic of the ground situation. If the politics of the minority leaders in 1948/49 was servile and unprincipled, that of the LTTE which came in that tradition was even more so. Its dealings with the Sri Lankan and Indian states, while portraying an air of defiance, was ultimately servile in a very real and more desperate fashion. This is the thrust of the message of the late Dr.Rajani Thiranagama (he Broken Palmyrah', vol II, ch.6).

The logical culmination of the LTTE's politics is to grasp at survival through making the people weak, servile and insecure, and preying on their fears and worst instincts. It thus needed to create division and hatred. Stirring up extreme Tamil-Muslim animosity became a ready means of accomplishing its aims. The pattern of events shews that by August 1990 this had become deliberate policy.

Commenting on the long term effects of this policy, a young man with a 20 year long commitment to the struggle had this to say: "In January 1974, 9 persons died of electrocution when the police charged into the International Tamil conference in Jaffna. We were then doing our A' Levels. The event consumed our youth and distorted our rationality for years. Just imagine how the deliberate massacre of over a hundred worshippers at the Kattankuddy Mosque would do to Muslim youth".

This politics needed stereotyped enemies, and the fact that Muslims fitted the bill is partly accidental. The LTTE in the past had displayed paranoia when dissent or disenchantment with it was associated with a village or communal group. The LTTE, as mentioned, has shown a readiness to use caste and people's origins in campaigning against opponents. Caste had been an emotive issue in Jaffna in the latter -60s with the government trying to cash in, as with Tamil-Muslim differences in the East in the mid-80s. The issue is still only papered over. With the politics so depraved, had the Muslims not been there, some other communal division could have easily served the LTTE's purpose.

A glaring consequence of its destructive violence is that its vision of Tamil Eelam, on behalf of which thousands have been and are being sacrificed, has become totally untenable. If this vision is to be realised, the LTTE, even if it can manage the Tamils, has to enact a Bosnian scenario where the Muslims are concerned. This is practically beyond the LTTE's capabilities. The rhetoric remains, together with its associated human sacrifice. This obnoxious vision of Eelam too leads a shadowy twilight existence in the minds of prominent LTTE supporters. But only so with a huge dose of amnesia. This will be the subject of the next article.