



Guerillas, fisherboys, fishermen, all together, push the boat into the sea: established bonhomie



The fibreglass guerilla boat used for the crossing: outpacing Sri Lankan gunboats

On a guerilla boat to Sri Lanka

The Sri Lanka Tamil guerillas have been making boat runs between Vedaranyam in Tamil Nadu and Jaffna for three years now. KAJAL BASU tried to get into Jaffna through the "unofficial" guerilla route, but the boat came under fire from a Sri Lankan gunboat five kilometres from the Jaffna coast and had to turn back. Photographs by SADANAND MENON

THE guerilla boats leave the bleak, marshy Vedaranyam coast in Tamil Nadu twice or thrice a week, each carrying 18 guerillas wearing casual lungis, sarongs or just swimming trunks. The 25-ft-long Cey-Nor (Ceylon-Norway collaboration) fibreglass boats were originally meant for fishing along the shallow Jaffna coast but have now been converted into guerilla speedboats running the gauntlet between the overlapping territorial waters of India and Sri Lanka.

We hit the placid, grey beach at 3 pm on Saturday, August 25. The Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) "safe house" in Vedaranyam village, a hideout from the public eye, is an old single-storeyed affair with thick walls and low, cool rooms. Twentyfive lithe young Sri Lankan Tamils—some of them freshly trained in the surrounding marshland, some caretakers of the safe house—give it a college hostel atmosphere: batches of boys cook, clean the place, carry messages to other safe houses and take shifts looking after the boats on the beach.

Sadanand Menon, a freelance photojournalist, and I wait it out chewing our nails in Madras while messages tack to and fro between India and the EPRLF activists in Jaffna. The other side has been told that two journalists are going to make the guerilla run, and will stay in Jaffna before making the run back.

The trip from Madras to Vedaranyam, via Kumbhakonam, is bone-breaking. The Sri Lankan Tamils are careful not to declare themselves openly, but their peculiar Tamil—a mix of Indian Tamil and Malayalam—sometimes gives them away. On the bus to Kumbhakonam, the conductor asks Shenkanal (Red Embers), a well-known Eelam poet with two poetry volumes to his credit, whether he has the tickets. Shenkanal replies, "O'm" (yes), instead of the Indian Tamil "A'mma." The conductor ignores the slip.

At a dinner stop, Shenkanal casts furtive glances at two other Tamils. He tells us that they might be Prabhakaran's Tigers—who are at ideological and tactical loggerheads with the other Eelam groups—tailoring us.

The long, flat Vedaranyam beach is littered with fibreglass boats. Three of them 200 yards to the left of the EPRLF landing point are Tiger boats, a few to the right belong to the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO). Each site is marked by a thatched hangar.

At 4 pm, the beach is crowded with little Tamil fisherboys plunging in and out of the water like porpoises. The sea is brown, glutinous. When the boys notice the guerillas, they run to a boat as if the routine has been followed for years. The boat is hauled out to the shallows in a collective orgy of straining dark bodies, fisherboys, guerillas, some fishermen, all together. It is an established bonhomie and there seems to be no question of hiding the run to Jaffna.

Rocking in the shallows, the boat is outfitted with three 40 horsepower outboards—two Edinrude, one Johnson, and another 40 hp Johnson inside as an extra. The 120 hp combined power will give the boat a speed of 40 knots an hour, raised by wind assistance to 45 knots. It is enough to outrace Sri Lankan gunboats.

The EPRLF also has two 115 hp motors and is hoping to buy another 125 hp soon, all of them to be fitted on to larger fibreglass boats. The larger boats are necessary to break through a tighter Sri Lanka naval cordon that the Eelam fighters expect in the next few months. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam are also said to be beefing up.

The seagreen boat, with a pilot, co-pilot and watch aboard, snarls out to sea for a test run. It parks in neck deep water while we wade in balancing loads of polythene-wrapped packages on our heads. Fisherboys cling like limpets to the sides of the boat, riding the waves.

The Admiral—as we have named our rather ferocious looking pilot—picks them off one by one and, helped by those who will stay behind, deposits them gently on shore.

The leave-taking is emotional, demonstrative. Although no EPRLF boat has ever been sunk by Sri Lankan gunboats, every trip could be the last for that boat. Six months ago, one of Uma Maheshwaran's People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) boats—which operate from Tuticorin—was caught out by searchlights on its way back from Sri Lanka. The PLOTE people had made two mistakes: first, they disregarded a warning by a smugglers' trawler that they had a

wave out.

We make mid-point, the Indian territorial limits, at 5 pm and there is consternation. The sun is still high enough to shatter our luck if a gunboat happens by. This has never happened before. Normally the Admiral putters to the mid-point and then opens the throttles wide, cutting noisily but fast through Sri Lanka naval surveillance.

The Admiral decides to reduce speed and we coast along, waiting for the sun to sink. He begins hoarsely singing an MGR film song. The poet is in the prow laughing and warbling a revolutionary song. The Admiral and co-pilot have been lighting a series of cigarettes in complete violation of safety precautions.

It wouldn't be safe to make a run back to India that night; second, there was no replacement pilot. The Sri Lankan gunboat just picked off the lone pilot, leaving the PLOTE boat rudderless and then mercilessly gunned down 19 PLOTE men. Four were captured alive. Now no Eelam boat leaves without a co-pilot.

Last messages are given for families in Jaffna. Twelve people are to be deposited in Jaffna: six boys under 20 years of age, honed to a sharp political consciousness, a few older men, two journalists. Some women guerillas were booked on that ride, but are offloaded for the

of petrol on board and a spark could fry the lot of us.

These are guerillas at complete variance with the guerillas that the West projects. They don't seem to be mournfully serious about a hard political purpose that overshadows every other consideration. They are not dressed in fatigues, do not have the stubble of struggle on their chins and do not cradle Kalashnikovs or Armaletes or burp guns casually. When asked if they sympathise with the Sinhalese working class, all of them say yes. They also say that a revolutionary struggle might ultimately have to in-

volve Sinhalese as well. An EPRLF central committee member says that they "have connections with some Sinhalese unions" and are working towards a tactical first strike against the Sri Lankan government and capitalists. Prabhakaran's Tigers, who are the only guerillas taking on the 5,000-man Sinhalese army posted in Jaffna, do not believe that the struggle can extend to the Sinhalese working class.

The sun is just touching the sea when a young guerilla spots an "American boat" just on the horizon. The Admiral decides to coast along hoping that we won't be sighted. It is 6.20 pm. We watch the American boat, flickering at

the point of invisibility, for well over 15 minutes.

The guerillas say that two American ships—probably frigates—from the Seventh Fleet have been parked inside Sri Lanka's territorial waters for well over a month. The ships came in just after an American nuclear submarine docked at Trincomalee six weeks ago on a "friendly visit". The ships probably help out the Sri Lankan gunboats with radar surveillance.

At about 7 pm, when the sun has gone down and the sea turns gunmetal grey, and we are half an hour from landing, the watch spots a gunboat on the horizon. We still coast along. The singing has stopped. The young boys sit hunched

It is obvious by now that we are neck deep in trouble. We can feel it in the stance of the Admiral, in the riveted eyes of the watch.

The red ball of the sun glowers to our right, the gunboat is to our left. Our boat must be silhouetted beautifully on the horizon, encircled by the sun. It is a sitting duck situation, a tactical mistake no seaman would make unless he were overconfident, and we know that the Sri Lankans would be blind not to catch us out.

Later, the Admiral tells us that the American ship probably spotted us on

our backsides. "We ran at it, we damage or sink a gunboat, the Sri Lankan navy will just take it out on the civilians in Jaffna. We want to avoid reprisals as far as possible. Our people have suffered enough."

This time, we skid around, and assisted by a howling wind from the rear, hit 45 knots. We turn towards safer Indian waters. The Morse code of lights from the guns of the gunboat are swallowed up by the churning wash of three screaming outboards. We weave, trying to make aim difficult. The gunboat, firing continuously, chases our wake, phosphorescent green, for about 18 kms.

Everyone but the Admiral and the watch is down, huddled, heads between knees. Wings of water cut by the high prow curve around and inundate the open boat. There is a biting wind. The terror is palpable. Anyone who can be so frightened is not a politicised, dehumanised metal man. Prabhakaran's Tigers—unafraid and dedicated—ritually commit suicide with potassium cyanide when they are caught. In their struggle for liberation, the Tigers believe in relaxing rules neither for civilians caught in army reprisals after Tiger raids, nor for their cadre.

After the boat slows down, the Admiral and the co-pilot go through a vitriolic argument. The Admiral wants us to return to Vedaranyam. The co-pilot scoffs at him, calls him a coward, and says that he has run many such cordons before.

Then the gunboats are sighted again, ringing the Jaffna coastline like beads on a string. There are five or six of them now and the Admiral says that he has never seen such security before. "If there were two gunboats, we could have broken through. With so many of them, they will probably have motorboats for close coastal surveillance. If we break through the motorboats, we'll still have to fight shore army patrols."

When the navy raided Valvettiturai a month ago, it had towed away 20 fibreglass fishing boats. According to reports, these boats have been fitted with outboards, are manned by three people and are possibly faster than the guerilla boats because they carry far less weight. The pipsqueak Sri Lanka navy is being beefed up.

Reports also say that the Sri Lanka government purchased two patrol vessels from Singapore two weeks ago. The *Deleika* and *Monrovia*, sources said, will probably be refitted with radar systems and night sights, with American expense. They will be parked on the Jaffna coast. Also, westwind Season reconnaissance aircraft and Dabur-class patrol vessels from Israel have been ordered.

The Indian government is said to know that the Sri Lanka government is looking for maritime arms. Three Indian

frigates are said to have docked at Madras last week, on their way to Raméshwaram.

Darkness comes down like a blight on the way back and the waves are choppy. The deluge continues. To the left, about 10 kms away, lightning flickers like a beacon. Shenkanal is morose, and he tells me softly that he has a wife—an EPRLF union activist—and three children in Jaffna. He was asked to come down to Madras for an EPRLF central committee meeting and is a bit homesick.

Furious at the Admiral for having rejected his bravado, the co-pilot settles an uneasy hand on the rudder. The Admiral directs him voicelessly on a straight path shown by the North Star. There is no talking at all.

The Admiral is a perfectionist in his own way. He is dark, bearded and round, a complete foil to the tautly muscular Eelam guerillas. He gurgles a bottle of arrack on the boat, and he is allowed to do so because he is the most valuable of the EPRLF activists. You could imagine this black Palatuff living

command, he is quiet, unflappable. "I know the way," he said. "I've been doing this route for 15 years." Fifteen years? Eelam wasn't even a concept then. "Smuggling," he said blandly. "I've been smuggling ever since I was 13."

Somewhere along the way, the Admiral counts the lighthouses and veers left to the Indian coast. A red dot blinks on and off. The co-pilot flashes a powerful sea torch beam and the boat closes in. When we beach it is 10.30 pm, six and a half hours from the time we left. Every bone in the body is aching; everyone is shivering uncontrollably. The EPRLF men on land are surprised to see this dishevelled parade of wet sparrows. This is the second time in three years that the Admiral has had to run from the Sri Lanka navy.



The boat in mid-sea, just before crossing into Sri Lankan territorial waters