

Paper 4

Remembering for the Future: The Historic Exodus and its Aftermath

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I wish to thank the organizers of this Conference for instilling hope in humanity by bringing together such an excellent panel of experts on a subject that is of critical international importance and serious national concern especially for the Tamil community of Ceylon. Let me tell you at the very outset that to a people who are marked, isolated, starved, beaten, traumatized and tortured, denied of all forms of medication and medical facilities, kept in segregation without any media access or direct contact with the rest of the world, the news of such gatherings will bring fresh hope. It will help them to have a sigh of relief in their enforced despair. Hope even if it is filled with anxiety and anguish should help us to move forward. Here, I am speaking of the people of Jaffna and Vanni, Batticaloa and Mannar in the north and east of Sri Lanka. In saying this I am not singling out a particular section of the population. There are various forms of unpardonable brutality that has been unleashed on innocent people with the sanction and endorsement of the state of Sri Lanka on its own civilians.

The electoral violence presided over by the President of Sri Lanka in the recent Provincial

council elections in Wayampa is still fresh in the memory of many. But I chose to speak for the people in the north and east because I am a personal witness to some of the tragic events. I have seen and experienced personally the banal and blatant disregard the Government of Sri Lanka has for the code of Human Rights and Human ethics. I have seen the callous disregard for the Rights of children and infants for food shelter, medicine and vaccine, for education and health. And yet the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka speaks eloquently about Tamil child soldiers. A blanket that he used at the international community to cover all the atrocities perpetrated by the State and its military machinery on Tamil children.

In the Sinhala regions, there are at least a few Human Rights NGOs actively working bringing some of the violations to light. The local and international media has full access to the Sinhala areas besides the physical presence of all foreign-missions and the diplomatic community. These safety measures are unimaginable to the hapless Tamils.

For the Tamils the war is fought behind an iron curtain. There are no channels for truth to travel. The few NGOs that operate in these ar-

as work under very severe and stringent conditions placed on them by the State. In fact in reality International NGOs are not permitted but tolerated to work among the Tamils. The NGO representative or delegates know from experience that theirs is a precarious presence. Speaking the truth about the oppression of the Tamils will cost them their job as well as their continued existence as an NGO in the Tamil areas.

Under the pretension of safety and security no journalist worthy of the name is allowed into the Tamil land, except for some periodic tour by selected government propagandists of the local and international press who pass off as journalists or news reporters. Here it may be worthwhile to remember that beginning with the murder of Richard de Soysa more than five journalists have been arrested, tortured, intimidated or killed in and around Colombo than in the war zone. Not one journalist was detained or killed in the Tamil areas by the LTTE, since the war began.

Today the entire national media is owned and operated by the Sinhalese and it is unfortunate that its the Sinhala electronic and print media that camouflages itself as national. It wouldn't take much expertise or research to conclude that the Sri Lankan print and electronic media has only one version of the reportage, i.e. the Sinhala version. Truth in all its vicissitudes is the major casualty in this process. As a result of the Sinhala only Act of 1956, today Sri Lanka has a Sinhala only army, police, navy and airforce, Sinhala only media, Sinhala only bureaucracy and a Sinhala only judiciary. It is for this reason that when there is an undue pressure for an autopsy on an innocent Tamil person killed by the army, the dead body is flown to Colombo for the post-mortem where a pre-arranged judgement is dictated upon and is issued by a Sinhala Judge. And yet one does not fail to hear in the

Indian press as well as in some unenlightened International press as AFP, Reuters and UPI much crowing about Sri Lanka's commitment to Human Rights. Poor Humanity!

I stand before you not because I have any particular expertise on the legal aspects of human rights, but I stand before you as a witness, as one who has seen the stark violation of Human rights in flesh and blood. I have seen the dead bodies of Tamil children and they haunt my writings. I see them again and again. I know that I shall always see them in the same condition as I saw them at Rasa Pathai at Thirunelvely on that ill-fated July (1993) morning at 8:10 a.m. when two 250 kg bombs dropped from a Supersonic jet had blown to bits more than eight children who were on their way to School. How can I forget the thirty or so dead bodies of children who were reduced to pieces of burnt and mangled flesh by a cluster of over five bombs dropped over a Primary school at Nagercoil on the August 20, 1995. It appeared to me as if the same child was killed thirty times.

In some of those sleepless nights when my mind tried to trace its steps by retreating into the realm of memory, I have helplessly asked myself why? Why these children should be killed? And who are those people who unleashed these bombs? They are not a bunch of some insane or even illiterate men. These are graduates from Military colleges and Universities, some of them lovers of music and the arts. They dressed and ate as ordinary men and yet they did not hesitate to kill children playing at the school grounds. They did not feel any qualms about dropping nine bombs each weighing 250 kg in very close proximity to the Church of Saints Peter and Paul at Navalay on the July 9, 1995. More than 120 refugee children, women and men were killed in a matter of four to seven minutes. When the dead

bodies were brought as a huge heap of human flesh, it was as if the dead bodies were asking us, what have you done with our future? No. I can never speak for the dead. No one can ever speak for them. How can I understand or interpret their dream and visions. They too were born to live. They too have every right to dream about their unborn future. In death they have spoken their language in total and absolute silence. Anyone who looked at those pieces of flesh can hear them as long as you don't count them as numbers. If you want to hear them, then mingle your tears with theirs.

As a result of indiscriminate bombings, sometimes a whole family of six or seven members entered into a common grave. And yet numbers never die. People even when they are bombed and killed as a family, die as individuals. In the war-zone we hear death in numbers, but we see each number has a face, a name, a parent or a sibling, a history or even a story. No numbers never die. Death was like God. It was everywhere, all powerful. Even little children knew more about life and death than their elders.

In a situation where children blown to bits, where innocent men and women are arrested, tortured and burnt or buried like dead dogs and cats. In a situation where helpless and poor women and school children are gang raped, mutilated and maimed. Can one remain neutral. Can one speak of neutrality. No! I tell you in such situations neutrality helps the killer. It condones the aggression. Here one has to take sides. Take the side of the victims. One should stand with the victims. That is what I have chosen to do. To forget and disregard such an experience is to betray it. One must remember it and remember it for the sake of our future. For the sake of the future of humanity. Yes the dead bodies were those of Tamils. Tamils were killed but

it was human-kind that was assassinated. But these deaths created no echo.

The western world, the so called free world knew every thing. Their foreign missions sent periodic reports of the atrocities perpetrated by the Sri Lankan State on the Tamil population. But the world did nothing. Nothing in particular to save the life of children, of innocent men and women. Perhaps in the eyes of the western political leadership and law makers, in the eyes of the media personnel and public—these Tamil children and other men and women who were bombed and killed had a different color of skin and therefore not fully human?

Seva Vanitha is an organization directly helping the ministry of defense in prosecuting this war. I understand that the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) makes financial contribution to this organization. *Sarvodaya* was responsible for uprooting of a large number of Tamil families from Vadamunai and Manalaru and after evicting the Tamil families from their traditional habitats, the Sinhala agents of *Sarvodaya* distributed the land to ex-convicts and to other hoodlums. *Sarvodaya* which is a sectarian Buddhist propaganda establishment receive lavish funding from CIDA. The monitoring of most of the projects run by such NGOs are done by the Sinhalese with little or no attention to objectivity and truthfulness.

Today the advocacy of Human Rights has become a lucrative national and international industry. With two or three government sponsored visits to a country people begin to talk authoritatively about human rights. Almost every western and north American foreign mission has a HR desk with a full-time employee recruited locally. For the effective operation of global marketing strategies and economic advantages, Diplomats and politicians do not fail to do

lip-service to human rights as a preface to their political or economic negotiation. Public lip service to Human Rights help them to move on quickly to the prime-issues of the political and economic agenda. Nothing can be more cruel, more inhuman and more treacherous than this form of dubious diplomacy.

This kind of approach to Human Rights to say the least is sinful and unpardonable. How can a human being seek to thrive and make a profit for his or her life over the death, disappearance, torture, trauma, tears, blood, mutilation and murder of another. It is worse than what the murderer does to his/her victim. Do not ever allow the powers that be to make Human Rights a lucrative job, do not allow to reduce humanity to this form of degrading debasement. It is with deep pain in my heart that I say that even some church bodies have been unwittingly or otherwise lured into this form ludicrous advocacy of human rights. But the advocacy of basic an fundamental human rights has become the final act of hope for the Tamils of Ceylon, therefore I would like to look at the Exodus of half a million Tamils from their homeland on that ill-fated day of the October 31, 1995 as the most abject form of the denial of the Human rights of the Tamils for land, security and safety.

Disbelief and forgetfulness are the weapons of those who are opposed to humanity an therefore to Human rights. Forgetfulness is the antidote to truth and truthfulness of memory. When I left Jaffna on that formidable night of October 29, 1995, I said to myself, if by some sheer chance I survive this ordeal, this collective debasement and degradation of an entire population, I shall gather the names, the faces, the tears the wails and woes of these people whose shadows have become part of mine. I consider myself to be one who has survived by chance, the inhuman

atrocities unleashed by a State on a community which is claimed by the same State as its own.

I therefore wish to begin and end with reality. For any response that does not fittingly correspond to the reality eventually becomes irrelevant and futile. The survivor has a twofold duty. He or she is bound by duty to transmit or communicate the experience which embodies the collective suffering and misery of a helpless people. In a context in which such an enormous suffering is prolonged endlessly by the evil designs of a State machinery, the refusal to share this experience can become even a betrayal.

What I am trying to do therefore is a remembering of the past for the sake of the future. My response to the reality of my experience is to struggle against the mute silence of those who knew everything and did nothing. Nothing in particular to save the lives of innocent children, men and women.

For me any response whether it is regional, national or international has to be a response to reality. It is we human beings who have the capacity to distinguish between reaction and response. It is we who have the ability also to respond. I said that we always respond to reality and reality ranges from God to the Sun to stone. We respond by word, action or even silence.

The reality in the North and East of Sri Lanka cannot be reduced to a sheer ethno-political categories neither can it be seen purely as a civil war in a small corner of the world. None other than the President of Sri Lanka has acknowledged recently that over seventy thousand Tamils have died in this inhuman war. It is true that large number of Tamils have died in this war. But one must remember that it is humanity that is getting killed. If I were to pronounce their names one by one we will have to sit here the whole night. I say this because numbers never die.

Each number has a person, a relationship, a family, a life, a future and a dream.

Isolating events and labeling them as acts of terrorism and trying to pass value judgments on selected incidents is to deny the historical spectrum. It amounts to the refusal to see and encounter truth in all its bitterest forms. Yes even if it tastes bitter truth is to be given priority. A war should be seen in its totality and not by any selectivity.

People sometimes imagine that a killer becomes weak and pitiful when facing a child. Many of us tend to think that a child has the capacity to reawaken the lost humanity in the killer – that a child might deflate a killers brute instinct – but not in Jaffna, not in Poovarasankulam, not in Kumarapuram, not in Kokkadichcholai, not in Pillaiyarady – Batticaloa. A Tamil child had no effect upon its killer, nor upon the world nor upon God. Poor child! Poor humanity!

In the beginning of this century hardly 500 Eelam Tamils lived in Europe and North America, today more than five hundred thousand Tamils live in the Northern hemisphere. This means that more than twenty-five percent of Tamil families in the north and east are torn apart to be re-united only by death.

Today for the Tamils Human Rights advocacy is not a legal luxury. It is their hope. It is their promise for survival. It is their meaning of life because it can prevent them from dying and being killed heartlessly.

Looking at this indescribable suffering of the innocent I have often felt that we all live in a world that has become unresponsive to the cries of the poor and under privileged. Such an attitude calls for solidarity among the victims and the oppressed. We also live in a world where a common agenda seems to unite all those who

have chosen to be the enemies of humanity. It is our duty to fight this mute silence of the world with the power of the word. We should allow the word of Truth about the poor and innocent about voiceless women, men and children, to seek refuge and self-exile. Let us speak this word to the powers that be. All that we carry with us now is the memory of our life and that of the death of our fellow citizens of Eelam. It is memory that will continue to nurture our thirst for freedom and dignity.

4.1 THE BURDEN AND BLISS OF MEMORY

Memory is an essential and indispensable part of our life as human beings. It is through memory that our civilization is moulded and our historical existence is given an unbroken continuity. It is memory that defines and nurtures our collective social consciousness and communitarian existence. The certitude of the past, confidence about the present and hope for the future are made possible by memory. Human life, continuity and the development of cultures and languages would have become extinct without memory. Memory has been a powerful humanizing potential and therefore has rightly served as the intellectual and civilizational “gene” of all human civilizations and the growth and development of nations and people. Even in the spiritual realm, no religion would have survived or spread without the perpetuation of the power of the “religious core” through memory.

In this era of an ever-expanding revolution in communication which is accelerated almost daily by the rapid growth of a multi-factorial computer technology, it is “memory” that plays a decisive and determinant role both in the manufacture and marketing of hardware and software engineering. Whether is it human or hi-tech, it is the remarkable power to to retrieve, retain and

recall that has become the most fascinating foundation of memory. The technological consolidation and fixation of memory informs us clearly of its indispensability for human life, existence and history. It is in this context that I would also like to recall and remember the administration of a fair section of Eelam territory by the LTTE leadership.

4.2 THE FORE-TASTE OF SELF-RULE AND THE NATIONALIST ASPIRATION

The brief span of the first half of the last decade of this eventful century will be frequently referred to as the most significant period in the history of the State formation of the Eelam Tamils. Having been under alien regimes since the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was during this period that the Tamils of the Northern Province stretching from Point Pedro to Vavuniya had a first hand experience of self-rule under the efficient and impartial administration of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. If popular public "reception" of a governmental system can be considered legitimate, then the LTTE was the legitimate government that administered this province with the support of a vast majority of the population. This period served also as a strong catalyst rejuvenating the fervor of Tamil nationalism that has come to characterize the entirety of the thirst for Tamil nationhood. By the sheer demand of circumstances, during this period the LTTE had to fill in the vacuum created by the collapse of the government's administrative apparatus in the north. A group which originally emerged as an armed freedom movement, now had to take up the task of administering a civilian population of over a million in the northern province – an exercise which brought them closer to the people whom they sought to liberate from the chains of Sin-

hala oppression and military repression.

The popular and near unanimous "reception" of the LTTE's administrative system by the Tamils, conferred on the LTTE a quasi-legitimacy which was democratically far more meaningful than the farce that was enacted by the government of Sri Lanka, as Provincial elections in 1988 and "General election" in 1994 in some parts of the Eelam territory occupied by the military where a few Tamil quislings were elected members of parliament with a total of less than 50 votes in electorates that normally had a vote-bank running into several thousands.

It is here that the fore-taste of the State-formation that the Tamils experienced under the LTTE from June 1990 to November 1995 in the Northern province and particularly in the Jaffna peninsula attains a certain communitarian credibility, political value and historical significance. Though short-lived in chronological time, this period is of vital historical significance for the Tamil population in the North as well as in the rest of the island nation. Virtually the entire Northern province except for a few pockets of land encamped by the Sinhala army or navy, was almost completely under the administrative control of the LTTE.

It is also to be noted here that the LTTE took up the administrative apparatus not by exerting any force but by responding to emerging needs of the population. The government of Sri Lanka virtually abandoned the service sector such as Water and Electricity supply, Transport and other public services. The judiciary and the law and order system also created a vacuum and this was eventually filled in by the LTTE. It was during this period Mr. Pirabhakaran, the Leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam came to be referred to as *thēsiya thalaivar* (National Leader) and the Tamil population came to recog-

nize him as one whose position in the administrative apparatus is equivalent to a Head of State. Under the Leadership of Mr. Pirabhakaran several other Heads of administrative divisions were appointed who were named as *porupalar* (person who is responsible). These persons virtually had a Cabinet status within the quasi-State system that operated in the North. Mr. Thamilchelan was the *porupalar* for the Political and Civil Administration, the Financial Sector was under Thamilenthir, Mr. Para was *porupalar* for Justice and Mr. Nadesan for the Law and Order systems. Mr. Ravi was in charge of Economic Development which included Agriculture, Fishing, Industry and Environment. Offices for these Departments were opened in almost all major towns with a Head office for each Division close to the City of Jaffna. In most of the Divisions the existing Public service division of the government of Sri Lanka was also reasonably incorporated without any hostility toward them. Some of the officers of the Government of Sri Lanka like the Government Agent, Grama Sevakas etc. were permitted to exercise their function in collaboration with the parallel system established by the LTTE. Many retired Civil Service personnel, engineers and other skilled administrators and academics volunteered to extend their knowledge and expertise to the Heads of divisions of the LTTE administration, in the respective areas of their specialization.

What I wish to out-line here are some of the mechanisms of governmental and administrative system introduced and carried out by the LTTE. It should be remembered that in all these avenues of administrative exercise there was overwhelming support and acceptance from the Tamil population for whose benefits these were initiated and executed by the LTTE. For the sake of clarity and brevity I have divided

them into five areas, namely: (1) Judiciary, (2) General Civil Administration, (3) Economic Development, (4) Environment, (5) Education, and (6) Social Issues. I shall comment briefly on each one.

4.3 JUDICIARY

The Judiciary in the Northern Province almost completely collapsed in 1987 when the Indian Peace Keeping Force came to occupy the Northern Province. Several Civil litigation cases were left unattended until the LTTE introduced the court-system in 1992. The LTTE also published a "Code of Law" in Tamil which was strictly applied. Subsequent amendments to this code was made periodically and these too were published. Several Police stations were opened in almost all townships and efforts were made to restore the law and order system. The people gave their cooperation to these endeavors. It should also be admitted that there was a sharp drop in major crimes and very often disputes related to inter-family feuds, illegal distilling of liquor, drunkenness and petty robberies were among the common problems reported to or resolved by the police. Cases of rape and murder were almost nil compared to the past. There was no favoritism or any other form of bribery or corruption. The Police were unarmed and were very helpful to the people when they approach them for assistance. Even when there were incidents of theft or other problems that occurred in such Governmental institutions as the Kachcheri or the University of Jaffna, these were reported to the police and their decision was considered final.

4.4 GENERAL CIVIL ADMINISTRATION

The LTTE also appointed officers to levy taxes and revenues for the services provided, rang-

ing from transport to trade, production, marketing and distribution of food and other essential items. Transport and the infra-structure were regulated by them with the active cooperation of many civilians drawn from the professional and other classes. By introducing a job-bank, the LTTE provided opportunities for skilled and other laborers avenues for job-opportunities in their own industries or in the few private institutions and businesses.

They introduced a system of levying taxes for motor-vehicles and issued number plates. Major road accidents were either investigated by the police or handed over to the courts depending on the gravity of the problems involved. The Civil Administration in coordination with the Internal Security and Transport Division issued passes (visas) to those leaving or coming into the Northern province.

4.5 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT

The Research Organization of Tamil Eelam known originally as ROOTE which was originally founded in the United Kingdom by the LTTE was re-named Tamil Eelam Economic Development Organization TEEDOR. This organization coordinated and promoted all activities related to research and development ranging from farming to fishing and industry to infra structure.. It brought under one umbrella all the experts in such diverse fields as medicine, community health, engineering, animal husbandry, fisheries and marine sciences, rural reconstruction and resettlement, power and energy, environmental protection and soil conservation. The extra-ordinary achievements that can be attributed to TEEDOR in the area of agriculture, fuel, industry and housing cannot be summarized in these few pages. It needs a lengthy

study. For each of these TEEDOR has produced a manual and other statistical record which is very commendable. In fact in hind-sight it can be said that without the commendable foresight of TEEDOR a fair section of the population in the North would have died of starvation or malnutrition when the government imposed a merciless and inhuman economic embargo on the North for over five years.

TEEDOR funded and manned small industries from salt-production to prawn-farms. The Tamil Eelam Bank inaugurated by the LTTE in 1993, introduced a revolving loan system that benefited thousands of widows and other self-employed persons from the poor and rural sector. TEEDOR planned and executed these programmes with an enviable expertise.

The long term development projects ranging from re-forestation to construction of high-ways were under taken with the involvement of the people. Since 1987 no effort was made on the part of the government to repair the roads or high ways neither was any money allocated for these purposes by the Sri Lankan government.

4.6 EDUCATION

Conscious of the fact that the Tamils always gave top priority to Education the government of Sri Lanka made extra efforts to destroy the educational impetus of the Tamils. Beginning from the burning of the library, the systematic ethno-cultural genocide was done in two forms. Since 1987, the government of Sri Lanka did not permit the recruitment of teachers, putting up additional buildings and other facilities as laboratories or libraries. While denying the most basic of educational facilities to the North, the government was very generous with funds to the Schools and universities in the South where enormous amount of money was allocated for

building up of swimming pools and gymnasiums. Even the text books freely distributed to school children rarely reached the Tamil students.

The second form was to destroy schools by bombing and shelling or to use them as army barracks or dormitories for the army especially in the occupied areas. Such huge school buildings as Mahajana College and Union College at Tellipallai, St. Henry's College at Ilavalai and several other primary and High schools have been under army occupation for over five years.

To counter the vicious plans of the government, the LTTE appointed Mr. Illamkumaran as *porupalar* for activities related to education. He coordinated the work of conducting examinations, preparing of text books and providing facilities for school children who were displaced due to military assaults on schools. In certain subjects the school curricula was also planned and appropriate text books were prepared, printed and distributed to students. The cooperation of the governments department of education was utilized for this purpose.

4.7 SOCIAL ISSUES

In 1994, the LTTE introduced a new legislation which made the giving or receiving of dowry a punishable offense. This was done to positively restore their image, identity and function of women as equal citizens in the new State. All inequalities based on caste stratification was declared a punishable offense. In the social realm, caste and sub-caste loyalties with its traditional negativities has been slowly fading away giving way to a pan-Tamil unity. Hindu temples which were once closed for the low caste groups have opened all their doors when the north was under the administration of the LTTE.

The Sinhala government and its unruly military, despite the sophisticated training given to

them by the Defense establishment of the US, UK, China, India and Pakistan have used these newly acquired talents to continue unabatedly their campaign of terror and intimidation. But it is the duty of those of us who have an unshaken hope in the graceful nature of humanity to expose and denounce these powers of evil and all their ruthless accomplices. It is a sad predicament of history that with such monstrous memories of the holocaust, even Israel has become an accomplice in the death of the Tamils. Their military expertise is extended to the Sinhala State to exterminate the Tamils.

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