

Interview with Ragavan on Tamil Militancy (Early Years)

Saturday 16 May 2009, by [KADIRGAMAR Ahilan](#) (Date first published: 16 February 2009).

As the Tamil community in Lanka is at the crossroads with twenty five years of war nearing an end with the increasing marginalization of the LTTE, I would like to do a series of interviews on the social, economic and political conditions that led to the emergence of armed politics and militarization of the Tamil community. Returning to those years in the seventies and early eighties then is an attempt to also think about ways forward out of the militarized and armed politics of the last few decades. I intend to do a series of interviews to capture that important political period for Lankan Tamils. This important shift in Lankan politics and the decades of war that followed it did irreparable damage to the Lankan Tamil community and all the peoples of Lanka.

I begin with an interview of Ragavan, a founding member of the LTTE, who left the movement in 1984 and has since moved to London where he lives in exile. In this first interview, Ragavan speaks about his background and early years of militancy.

This is an interview by Ahilan Kadirgamar of Ragavan at his London home on 25 January 2009.

AK: Given the current political moment where we could be ending a cycle of a different form of political engagement by the Tamil community, where politics was very much militarized, I am interested in speaking to your generation in particular. I would like to hear your thoughts on the formation of Tamil militancy in the 1970s and 1980s; the social, economic and political conditions that led to the emergence of a very different kind of politics from Tamil politics during the previous century. I want to begin by asking you a biographical question, about your own background.

R: I should start by saying that I am looking at the past through the present. My knowledge and experiences have been different, and I may have answered your questions very differently if you had asked me the same questions in the seventies.

The seventies were the time of economic changes as well. The import-substitution economy was implemented by the Sri Lankan government at that time. There was an uprising in the South with the JVP, due to the disgruntlement of the Southern youth. That also perhaps had an impact on us. The state was unable to address the growing unemployment crisis at that time. Due to the disenchantment of the Southern youth, the state introduced a standardization scheme, which stated that Tamils should get higher marks to get into the university. In a post colonial setup, without a vibrant economy and a strong national bourgeoisie, the job opportunities were limited and there was much competition to gain employment in the state sector and the growing middle classes competed for state jobs. Entering university to become a doctor, engineer or getting a job in a bank and other state departments were the few options available for the middle class to climb the social ladder. Until 1970, Sri Lanka mainly relied upon exporting raw materials such as tea and rubber and the prices were determined by the world market. The growing oil prices in the 1970's further affected the third world countries. The newly formed United Front government in 1970 consisted of the

SLFP, CP and LSSP which introduced the import substitution economy. I would say that it was ideologically a nationalist project with a socialist tint.

However, the United Front government faced serious economic and political crisis due to the global economic crisis. After they crushed the JVP uprising in the south, the state introduced standardisation policy in order to satisfy the unemployed Sinhala middle class in the South. In a sense, it mainly impacted the Tamil middle class youth particularly from Jaffna and the Sinhala middle class youth in Colombo, with respect to university admissions. The Tamil middle class youth, especially from Jaffna perceived this as an act against Tamils... Tamils from the East, Mannar, Vanni or upcountry were not bothered about the standardisation policy. Students from those areas were rarely admitted to the universities at that time. The standardisation policy, which affected Jaffna Tamil middle class students, was the main catalyst for the militancy. Although the Sri Lankan state disenfranchised Up-Country Tamils in the past and there were colonisation programs in the east, the Jaffna middle class Tamils did not take those issues to form a 'Tamilness' or to fight for the rights of Tamils. Secondly, although the Tamil United Front (TUF) started talking about Tamil rights and the federal set up and so on, at that time in the early seventies, they had not started talking about a separate state. However, there was another organization at that time called the Suyaatchi Kazhaagam (Self-rule Forum), under the leadership of V. Navaratnam, who propagated the idea of a Tamil nation.

Firstly, the Tamil youth, particularly the educated Tamil youth, took up this idea of a Tamil nation after the introduction of standardisation. However, their social composition was Tamil middle class, and upper caste as well, that is the university aged youth and Advanced Level students. These students took up this cause and there was a major protest in Jaffna against standardisation in 1970. I was a student at that time and I remember going to the protest march. It was a reasonably peaceful march in which thousands of students from 8th Standard to University participated, and it was organized by the Maanavar Peravai (Student Front) led by Sathiyaseelan. I can recollect some of the slogans which claimed that Tamils were a great educated people. For example, people shouted whether Baddiuddin Mohammed (Education Minister) knew "Alpha Beta" implying that the Tamils are great mathematicians but that this Minister did not know mathematics. It also had an anti-Muslim character in the way they attacked Baddiuddin Mohammed. At that time, I was not fully aware of the nuances of such rhetoric. One year later the government changed its standardisation policy and introduced district quotas and as a result, students from the underdeveloped villages were able to enter the university. However, the Jaffna Tamil middle classes did not want to acknowledge this, as this was against their own interests.

The violence started from there as well, where the armed movements' goal was to kill the traitors; those who were working with the State. So, there were three attempted assassinations, where, Duraippa was the primary target.

AK: Stepping back a bit, your own family background, did that have any impact on your affinity towards Tamil nationalism at that time?

R: As with any Jaffna Tamil middle class family, their aim was to educate their children and make them a doctor or engineer, there was a production line mentality. At least one child, the elder child, should try and become a doctor, an engineer or at the least an accountant. Due to the lack of resources or social limitations, that was the only goal. There is a proverb in Tamil, "Kolzii meinthallum governmentil meikavendum" (even if you are going to have a chicken farm, you should do it for the government), that was the middle class aim, and had become the Jaffna Tamil mentality. Next there was the family structure, with the authoritarian father figure, and I wanted to leave the family soon. You can't question the father. And I also had a rebellious character and I wanted to leave the family as soon as possible, even before I joined the LTTE, I wanted to leave the house. I was even

thinking of getting a job after I passed my O'levels. During this time I was inspired by Tamil nationalist ideology and began to read papers such as 'Suthanthiran' and 'Viduthalai'. When I was a student at Central College, I would go to the Jaffna Library which was close by and read the news papers, particularly 'Viduthalai' (Freedom) inspired by the idea of nationalism.

AK: In your formative years, how did the issues of class and caste play out in your local community? Were you conscious of such issues at that time?

R: I was very conscious of caste at an early age. My village, Punallaikatuvan, which was divided into various areas, and Punallaikatuvan did not have one identity, there was the North side and South side of the village and marriage customs were different and restricted. So when I was quite young, there was a man called Thuraisingam, an upper caste man and a Chandiyar (a local village thug), my mother told me that he murdered a man long ago. He also owned land and the Dalits were the service caste and they would work for him. At that time I was about six or seven years old, in the early 60's, and one day, there was some problem with the Dalits, possibly because they didn't want to work as he hadn't paid them properly. The outcome was that the entire Dalit community was chased away from my village. If you look at our recent history, it is like the manner in which the Northern Muslims were chased away. So, all the Dalits were chased away from my village and their belongings were taken away by the Chandian and his followers. And it took them a long time before they could come back and resettle. No one challenged that eviction at that time and that had a lasting impact on me even though I was also from a Vellala middle class family. In a certain sense the Tamil nationalist ideology claimed that all Tamils should be united, and while we did not think about the caste contradictions at that time, we nevertheless thought that everyone should join the struggle without considering the structural inequalities and the caste hierarchy

In the seventies, while it was already in law, the government of Sri Lanka attempted to implement equal access for Dalits in temples and public places. Temple entry in my village was out of the question, as no one was willing to challenge it because of the strength of the caste system. I remember going to a barber saloon (barbers belonged to the oppressed castes), when I was small, and asking the barber if he will allow Dalits into his saloon. There was a big muscular farmer standing next to me and he slapped me, because he was angry that I would even ask such a question. Ultimately, the barber saloon was closed, as the barber was scared of the upper castes. And after the saloon was closed, the barber started visiting people's houses and performing his work. So, particularly in the villages, the caste system was very strong. With the service castes at that time, there was no question of workers rights, whether you were paid or not, you were expected to work.

At the same time, then in the seventies, there was no strong sense of Tamil identity; the village identity and caste identity were much stronger than Tamil nationalist identity. I believe that it is still the case; as in practice the cultural and religious festivals are caste orientated and the identity is preserved. Although Tamil identity in a sense is there, it is the outer layer, rather than the substance of the Tamil community. The social practices such as festivals, marriage and death are arranged according to the caste and village hierarchy and what you practice is what you are. And although Communist parties in the north at that time talked about class, there was no real working class formation at that time, and only a few factories, like the cement factory, so I would say class was subsumed under caste. While there might have been class divisions, there wasn't a strong class consciousness, where as caste consciousness was very strong. So, class was seen through caste, with caste more dominant than class. Even a worker from the upper caste would not allow a Dalit to marry his daughter or to even allow him inside his house. I would say that when the Chinese Communist Party took up temple entry, caste took a prominent role, and the caste issue was dominant even though the Communist Party interpreted it in class terms. Without the elimination of the caste system, I believe that class unity is not possible

The other important factor was the independence and formation of Bangladesh. India's role was admired by the Jaffna Tamil community, and many politicians began referring to India as the motherland.

AK: Moving onto the Tamil political formations at that time. Particularly the dominant role of the Federal Party, how did that influence youth like you?

R: Although the Federal Party was talking about Tamil nationalism, they did not have any organized program. They did not even have a committee or village level organizational structure. What they would do is, come every now and then, and say this is our agenda. Even at that time, the Federal Party did not create the democratic political space, because there was no political participation by the people in the organisation. I would say the Federal Party just made decisions at the top, and was merely passed down. I often compare the difference with the DMK in India, while I don't agree with DMK's politics, they did have a strong organizational structure; there are committees at the village level, there are different layers of organizational structures. The Federal Party did not have that, and may be they would have one person in each village, and the Federal Party Member of Parliament will come and talk to him, and he will arrange a meeting once in a blue moon. So, the democratic space or democratic culture was not there. I am exclusively talking about Jaffna society at the moment. Anyway, neither did we have the democratic culture, there was the repressive character of the caste system, so the democratic mindset was also lacking. So, everything from caste to the family, it was a hierarchical structure and the hierarchical system was designed in such a way to obey the order than to discuss or criticise. I believe that the LTTE's political ideology reflected the Jaffna Tamil middle class and upper caste interests and their pride while its authoritarian structure stemmed from the family and caste hierarchical system. So while we are talking about the need for democratic culture at the current moment, I would say we did not have it at that time either. Electoral democracy was there, but not a democratic culture, and even grassroots civil society organizations did not exist. There were only the state structures.

AK: What was the politics that came down in this top down manner from the Federal Party and the Tamil Congress, and how did it impact your politics?

R: Tamil Congress was seen as a Colombo based party for the elite. But the Federal Party was seen as a party of the Tamil people. At that time, people would say that G. G. Ponnambalam was great orator and a lawyer. In those days, the issue was about who is clever. They would say Chelvanayagam (leader of the Federal Party) is only a civil lawyer where as Ponnambalam has been to the UN. People would argue about such matters. I can still remember, the symbol of the Tamil Congress was the bicycle, where as the symbol of the Federal Party was the house, and people would argue about that as well. What is the use of the cycle, but the house you can live in it. (Laughter...) These arguments were about who you should vote for and not about Tamil rights. But after a while the Federal Party and then the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) played an important role in the rise of Tamil nationalism, particularly in the seventies.

I can say this, that the ruling government in the South had a vision about non-alignment and interest in nationalisation in opposition to the legacy of British colonial influence. So there was a progressive content to it. But unfortunately, it was mobilized as part of Sinhala nationalism and not as a Lankan nationalist consciousness. Instead of challenging the Sinhala nationalist ideology, the Federal Party was opposed to nationalisation; for example, the nationalisation of the Trincomalee Harbour under the control of the British.

Next, the Federal party or then the TULF did not have a political programme to continue a sustained campaign such as the civil disobedience movement in India or the civil rights movement in the USA. I believe that the TULF disseminated Tamil nationalist ideology without realising the consequences

as their main goal was to win seats in parliament. Although they addressed these issues in the parliament, when the state failed to address the grievances, the leadership did not have any alternatives but to talk about Bangladesh and mother India. Tamil rights or minority rights could have been fought politically with a sustained civil rights campaign. Due to the lack of political commitment from the TULF leadership a political gap was created and inexperienced adventurous middle class youths took up the role to fill the gap, which in turn created Tamil militancy. I believe that the rights of Tamils or other minorities should have been fought democratically and the TULF should have taken a lead role. My contention is that, in the context of Sri Lanka, it is a folly to describe the struggle of the rights of minorities as a national liberation struggle. However, in a colonial setting you may call it a national liberation struggle. In our case, there was ample space to fight for the rights of minorities within the democratic terrain and this was not done.

Now, if you take district quotas in education introduced by the government in 1972 instead of standardisation, that was not seen as a progressive step. Particularly the Federal Party leadership did not see this as empowering the youth from the rural areas. On the other hand, perhaps the Federal Party was concerned only about the Jaffna Tamil middle class upper caste youth, even if it might help Tamils in other areas. The nationalisation policies of the State were also seen as anti Tamil by the Federal Party and the TULF.

AK: Expanding more on Tamil nationalism in the 1970s, you mentioned how “traitors” were constructed and targeted, and you mentioned the idea of the Tamil nation that began to emerge. What other concepts became important and was the Federal Party actively cultivating and pushing these concepts?

R: Maanavar Peravai (Student Federation) led by Sathiyaseelan was formed in order to oppose the standardisation policy. Tamil nationalist ideology was also part of the program of the Maanavar Peravai. Although, there was no direct link between it and the Federal Party, it was a separate formation, but ideologically they shared the same view. Whoever was opposed to the Federal Party and later the TULF, the TULF would claim that they are traitors, and that they should not die naturally, so that kind of rhetoric seems to have tacitly encouraged violence. And the Maanavar Peravai was working actively to eliminate such traitors.

The Sri Lankan government also made a blunder when they introduced the Republican constitution of 1972, where Buddhism was given a prominent role. So, in addition to standardisation, these issues also contributed to the formation of a Tamil national identity.

AK: Was the State identified with the Sinhala community?

R: It is a complex issue. Of course the ruling class from the Sinhala community constructed Sinhala nationalism. However, whether the State identified with the Sinhala community is questionable as the Sinhala community is not a monolithic whole. The caste, class and regional differences were there. However a certain social class consisting of the Sinhala middle class and the Bikkus (Buddhist clergy) were able to disseminate Sinhala nationalist ideology and was able to consolidate power. We should not forget that the same State killed more than 70,000 Sinhala youths in the insurrections of the 70s and 80s. Therefore to answer your question, the State identified with Sinhala nationalism but not with Sinhala community.

I would say the Tamil nationalist ideology became a mirror image of the Sinhala nationalist ideology and there emerged a Tamil versus Sinhala framing. The Tamil nationalist leadership instead of challenging Sinhala nationalism and its ideological and political content, inverted the same ideological framework and started its political campaign from the same premises. Racist slogans and rhetoric were liberally used by both Sinhala and Tamil nationalists. Dutugemunu Ellara episode to

King Changilian and Pandaravanniyan's epics were reinterpreted, constructed and used for a modern nationalist construction.

I should tell you this story. My father was transferred to Mannar and my father wanted me to come to Mannar as he was aware that I was involved with militant groups. I went to Mannar and joined a Catholic college named St Xavier College. After a few months, there was a drama about Changilian, and until then I knew Changilian as the last Tamil king who heroically fought against the Portuguese. However, in Mannar, for Catholics, Changilian was a villain because he executed 600 Catholic converts. His son, who converted to the Catholic faith was a hero to Mannar Catholics. I am saying this to show that Tamil nationalist ideology portrays Tamilness in a particular way by concealing all the caste, class, religious and regional differences. It is applicable to Sinhala nationalism as well.

AK: Can we talk about the shift to certain forms of violence. You mentioned violence in the community, or violence in the family, or violence of caste oppression or the violence of the Chandiyan. But when did violence become explicitly political in the mainstream. Of course as you mentioned there was the construction of the traitor and the rhetoric that traitors should not die a natural death. However, there seems to be a major shift in the seventies. Even though there was the violence of the caste struggles in the sixties which were also political, but that was of a different scale. How were the acts of violence received? Indeed, in the South, there was already a major insurrection by then.

R: I think that the Jaffna Tamil society is structurally violent because of the caste system. When an upper caste man's honour is questioned he uses violence to assert his authority. If you look at it from the point of view of the 'honour' of Jaffna Tamil middle class upper caste students, the government's introduction of standardisation was to humiliate them. Humiliation is not tolerated by an upper caste male dominated society. Therefore violence against Dalits was now shifted to the Tamil political field where you take revenge for the humiliation. In the early seventies, this became the attempted murders, followed by the arrest of the Maanavar Peravai members in the 1972, and the crack down by the State.

The other important event was the Tamil Literary Conference in 1974, which was planned to take place in Jaffna, but the State attempted to block the conference and hold it in Colombo. But finally the conference was held in Jaffna, with the TULF mobilizing in a major way. On the last day of the conference, when the police blocked a protest, an electric cable fell, and nine people died of electrocution. I myself attended the conference the previous day, but I was not there on that last day. The conference could have happened without much mobilization if the State did not try to block it, but because of the State's short sightedness, even in my village, I started organizing events celebrating the conference. We decorated the road and had booths to provide water and drinks, like in temple festivals.

During that time Sivakumar, a young Tamil nationalist, tried to assassinate one of the police officers and failed. And then he became a "wanted person" and during an encounter he took poison and died in the hospital. That was a major incident, with a mass funeral. A lot of students including myself attended the funeral. And I remember even girls attended the funeral, even though girls don't normally attend funerals. There was always some kind of link between the TULF and these kinds of events. And the TULF called him a hero, and they compared him to Subash Chandra Bose and said that although they followed Gandhian principles to achieve their goal, they respected Sivakumaran as he had the same vision.

AK: When did you become an active member of the LTTE?

R: During those days, there were two other people in my village who were older than me, and quite active. They wanted to do something as well. At that time, even I thought it was good to eliminate traitors!

There was a jail break and four people involved with the Maanavar Peravai escaped from Anuradhapura prison and there was some connection with my village. One person from my village who was involved with the Maanavar Peravai had hid one of these people in our village. That was in 1974. They knew we wanted to become active so they started to talk to us. At that time, I also bought a pistol from a local thug. I of course hid the pistol, the police was not the big problem for me, it was my father! (Laughter...) During that time I also started writing slogans on the wall, and one day a local person saw me writing on the wall, and I ran away and stayed with my aunt for a couple of days, because I was afraid of my father, that he would beat me up. Then I returned after my family was looking for me. My father was a local school headmaster, so during that time, Minister of Education Baddiuddin Mohammed was visiting and all the schools were expected to welcome him. So the previous night, I went with a friend and wrote slogans like "Baddiuddin Mohammed Get Out!" We were engaged in such activities, which were inspired by the TULF's idea of protest. At that time, even more than opposing the State, we thought the "traitors" should be eliminated first.

So that was my first connection with the militants, when this person, Chetti, came and hid in our village, and I started helping them and then they did a Cooperative Store robbery. My role then was to take them to safe houses; I would take them on my bicycle and provide them with food and so on. And through such connections I met Prabhakaran. And Prabhakaran had also belonged to the Maanavar Peravai and it is through that connection that I met him in 1974 as well. Prabhakaran was talking about a separate state and I thought I will support him and that is how it all started.

The first organization Prabhakaran started was the Tamil New Tigers (TNT), the name was coined by Rasaratnam, who had been with the TULF and was a strong Tamil nationalist. Rasaratnam fled to India after Maanavar Peravai members were arrested and lived there until his death. Although the TULF was talking about federalism, I must say that the Suyaatchi Kazhaagam (V. Navaratnam's organization) always compared the Tamils with the Jews. So, the 'Exodus' was translated into Tamil. And if you read 'Viduthalai' papers at that time, they always related the Tamil people to the Jewish people. We are intelligent and they are intelligent. We are a small minority and they are a small minority. They do fasts and do not eat meat during fasting and we do the same. They were able to form a country of their own and we should do that. Therefore Tamil identity is also mixed with Hindu Identity or Saiva identity. So Prabhakaran, Kuttimani and Thangathurai all took up this idea. Prabhakaran and Thangathurai were from the same village. But Thangathurai was not part of the TNT, because he thought Chetti who was in our group was sent to a rehabilitation school for young people and was a thief.

So there were so many factors and relationships. For example Valvettithurai was important, it was a smuggling village, and an army presence was always there. So, there was some tension. Whereas in my village, I would hardly ever see the army. At that time, the army was a symbolic force not a fighting army. And there were only a few thousand soldiers in the entire country, and to my recollection there were only 6000 armed forces personnel; including the army, navy and air force. But in Valvettithurai, there was always tension between the army and the people, and that is one reason why the young people from Valvettithurai became active. Thangathurai was pro-US and pro-Israel. Prabhakaran also had that idea, but strangely, he was also inspired by Hitler, so he had a copy of Mein Kampf. He also was inspired by Bhagat Singh and Subhas Chandra Bose. It was a strange combination at one level. I think his idea was about Jewishness and the State and the formation of Israel on the one hand, and then the idea of eliminating the "other" came from Hitler. So, there was a connection in his mind. Anyhow, I was an early member of the TNT, as it had been

formed in 1974, and I joined them soon after. However I was not a full time member until 1976. None of us were mature enough to understand what we were doing. Part of the problem was the TULF, in that it did not have any concrete plans either to fight for federalism or a separate nation. The TULF just used all this rhetoric to gain parliamentary seats, but as a result these young people inspired by the TULF ideology wanted to fill the gap and this became a very dangerous problem.

AK: The iconic figures that you mention like Bhagat Singh or Hitler etc, were outside figures, were there any figures from the Tamil community that inspired the TNT?

R: No, even the Tiger, the flag comes from the Chola kingdom, so it was always inspired by actors outside. All this is part of the mythology, particularly when we claim, that we were two nations before the British came. We were unable to even identify with someone like a king from that nation.

AK: When did the interaction with India and Tamil Nadu begin? When did you first go to Tamil Nadu?

R: There was no direct interaction with India and Tamil Nadu. But in the early seventies itself, they would run to India to find safe haven. It had nothing to do with the Indian state or politicians; it was mainly through the smuggling links. They would go and stay with the Indian smugglers. I became "wanted" in 1976 and I went to India for the first time in 1976 in a boat from Mannar, which was arranged by Thangathurai. At that time, there were only a couple of local politicians who were sympathetic towards us.

AK: How did you become "wanted"? How did the police get to know about you?

R: On 27 July 1975, Duraippa was killed. I was not aware that he was going to be killed, but after he was killed, Prabhakaran came and hid in my grandmother's house. I used to stay with my grandmother and give students tuition and I used that cover to hide these people. Again, so I can tell my father that I was teaching them mathematics, when he asked me about them. All though the TULF would claim to support us, they did not give us even fifty rupees. Once I bicycled from my village (Punallaikatuvan) to Valvettithurai to get ten rupees from a man, because we did not have any money.

One thing I was quite amazed by Prabhakaran at that time. He would come and hide in my grandmother's house. I would go to college and return, and he would not have moved, he would be sitting in the same place. He was disciplined and extremely careful about his own safety in that sense. We did not have any money to run the organisation as we needed weapons, and so we robbed banks. So, in 1976 the Puttur bank was robbed.

Prabhakaran liked English movies not Tamil movies. He liked these Western and war films. That is where he learned to plan the robberies and to kill traitors. And he had very good memory power. If he met someone once, he will never forget them. We were a small organization and he would give ten bullets to one person and twenty bullets to another person and then he will remember exactly how many bullets we have left. He was also very organized.

So, after the Puttur bank was robbed, we started small farms with the money, and we cultivated onions and chillies. So, that was the cover, and it was our training camp. At that time, the TNT had about eight members and five of them were in the central committee, which included Prabhakaran, Aiyar, Pattanna, Kumarachelvam and I cant remember the fifth person. I was the youngest and a couple others were also in the group, including Chellakili. Then one person who was part of the bank robbery was caught. And he had given my name and I became "wanted".

P.S.

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<http://kafila.org/2009/02/16/interview-with-ragavan-on-tamil-militancy-part-i/>