

# Sri Lanka: The enduring relevance of Puthiyathor Ulagam

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## I

When Govinthan penned *Puthiyathor Ulagam* (A New World) in 1985, the intelligence wing of a Tamil militant group was hunting for him across Tamil Nadu.

Govinthan (real name: Soosaipillai Nobert) joined the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) in 1982. He and several others left PLOTE because they felt that 'the organisation's undemocratic ways and the arrogance of its leadership would lead to tyranny and further repression of Tamils' (Preface). Together they formed the 'Theeppori' group. PLOTE did not recognise their right to leave the organisation or their right to do politics independently. Its leadership, guided by fear, suspicion and a compulsion for totalitarian control set in motion a ruthless witch hunt that would kill more than a dozen of Govinthan's friends.

Govinthan escaped back to Sri Lanka, unscathed but met an ironical fate half dozen years later.

Soon after the publication of the novel the LTTE moved to wrestle control over the Tamil armed struggle. During 1986, Prabhakaran banned TELO, PLOTE and EPRLF in sequence; starting in May with the killing of a few hundred TELO youth in the horrifying Night of the Long Knives operation. LTTE leaders found *Puthiyathor Ulagam* invaluable for their propaganda as they sought to delegitimise and demonise PLOTE and other militant groups. Despite PLOTE's ban on the book, LTTE cadres went around Jaffna handing out free copies.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 1991, the LTTE arrested Govinthan in Jaffna. He was never seen again.

## II

*Puthiyathor Ulagam* revolves around the lives of protagonist Shankar, his friend Nathan, and fiancé Nirmala.

We meet Shankar as he departs to Tamil Nadu for PLOTE's military training. There he is confronted by a reality that betrays his expectations and vision - 'a socialist revolution through the Tamil Eelam liberation struggle' (p.14) - for the Tamil militant struggle and, indeed, Tamil Eelam itself. A few weeks into training Shankar learns of the Organisation's brutal torture centres. In the dark of the

night his comrades disappear. Many never reappear. Those that do, carry petrifying scars both visible and invisible. Disillusionment and despair descend upon the training camp and cloud the hearts of hundreds of Tamil youth.

In Jaffna, Nathan is caught between diverging loyalties. Between the military and the political wings of PLOTE there is constant squabbling with the arm wielders' hands growing stronger with each passing day. Ties with other militant groups are increasingly fragile. Then there is the Sri Lankan Army that is shooting down Tamils at will. Nathan's Jaffna is the embodiment of chaos. The reformist camp within PLOTE, of which Nathan is a key figure, finds itself cornered and isolated. The safety of its members hangs in the balance. Things would get chaotic still.

Nirmala awaits the return of Shankar. Her family captures the travails of the Jaffna middle-class of the time. Her parents seek a groom from an affluent family and Shankar does not quite fit the bill. Nirmala's elder brother, a university student, becomes involved with the LTTE and is arrested by the Sri Lankan Army. Nirmala herself wants to join PLOTE. For her, and other female members of Tamil militant groups, the struggle holds more than one incentive. For them, the armed struggle for Eelam is as much about Tamil rights as it is about women's emancipation.

### III

Govinthan contrasts hope against despair, the Tamil youth's yearning for liberation against Tamil leaders' arrogance, selfishness and their zest for power, and the reformist group's idealism and their penchant for grassroots level political mobilisation against the intelligence wing operatives' love of violence and contempt for political education. *Puthiyathor Ulagam* oscillates between these extremes - sketching a tragic and ultimately damning portrayal of the Tamil militant struggle in its budding days.

With remarkable economy of words Govinthan tackles a wide range of issues including casteism, nationalism, the place of women in the Tamil society and violence. His lucid social and political commentary makes *Puthiyathor Ulagam* so much more than a novel.

Tamil nationalists are at pains to present an independent Tamil state (or its approximations) as a panacea for ailments facing Tamils of all strata. Oppressed caste Tamils, however, harboured very real fears about the nature of such a state. On one occasion, an old man shelters Nathan for the night from the Sri Lankan Army. He speaks for many when he queries:

“ ‘Thambi! We are low caste. You boys are eating and sleeping everywhere now - without worrying about caste and all that. We like it. We are doing our best. But, thambi, will you boys do the same once you get this Tamil Eelam?’ (p.46)”

Govinthan recognised the Tamils' precariously fragile position: that there was hardly any difference between the Tamils' supposed saviours - i.e. Tamil militant groups - and their enemy when it came to perpetrating heinous crimes against innocent civilians. In a letter to Shankar, his father writes 'the Army is shooting Tamil people in the streets like dogs' (p.60). An army officer sexually harasses Nirmala after her brother's arrest; her parents are helpless and can only weep. On another occasion, PLOTE cadres capture a Tamil youth on suspicion of spying for the government forces. They wound him so badly he bleeds to death. Further inquiry in the vicinity reveals that he is an innocent man suffering from a mental illness. Upon learning this they proceed to nail a bullet through the man's skull, tie him up to a lamp post, and brand him a 'traitor'. An elderly civilian sums up the state of affairs succinctly:

“‘Government on the one side – our boys’ on the other!’ (p.199).”

Three women, Nirmala, Shankar’s mother and Geetha – a fiercely independent university student and an active member of PLOTE – play a dominant role in the unfolding of the story. Govinthan explores the role and place of women in Tamil society through their lives. Geetha and her boyfriend disagree over the appropriateness of wearing jeans. When her boyfriend publicly demands that she gives up wearing jeans or leaves him for good, her riposte is curt:

“ ‘I don’t need you. With your persistent demands you cannot even offer the comfort of these clothes.’ (p.90)”

After being accused by several male members of PLOTE’s military wing of treason Geetha responds:

“‘Prove it if you may. The time we hanged our heads before your lies has passed.’ (p.91)”

Nirmala and Shankar’s mother, too, are inspiring figures in their own ways. The latter becomes a campaigner against human rights violations of the government in her twilight years. Her commitment to the cause is refreshing as it is challenging. All too often, Tamil society forgets the vital role Tamil women have played in shaping and sustaining the Tamil struggle. Their courage is second to none.

A recurring theme in the book is how a large section of PLOTE – the military and intelligence wings – (mis)understood the armed struggle. They glorify the gun above politics. Internal killings, growing influence of the intelligence wing across the organisation and the suppression of dissent within and in the society are logical, inevitable fruits of this orientation. Govinthan pictures the safe house of PLOTE’s military wing operatives thus:

“ ‘Inside the room two beds were placed in opposing directions. On a tightly strung rope between two corners clothes hung in disarray. Pictures of centre-page glam girls from cinema magazines decorated the walls. A blood-stained Bruce Lee and boxer Mohamed Ali stood in the middle. On the wall opposite the door was the Organisation’s logo; the motto ‘Demolish All Repression’ was scribbled in pencil beneath it. Countless cigarette butts that lay on the floor bore evidence that the room had not been swept in days. The air was fouled by the stench of dust and dirt. The ceiling fan was fighting a losing battle against the scent of rotting flesh that filled the room.’ (p.203)”

Any progressive vision of Tamil politics is fighting a losing battle against the rot that set in with Tamil nationalism and the armed struggle. Disregard and contempt for thoughtfulness and responsibility in politics – and by extension for democracy itself – was the bane of most militant groups, particularly, the LTTE. Rajani Thiranagama described this phenomenon as a consequence of a ‘theoretical vacuum and lack of political creativity.’

Govinthan perceptively writes in the concluding pages:

“ ‘It is not enough to fight against the terror of the Sinhalese government; we should do so against the terror that is creeping inside PLOTE. Indeed we must fight against terror and oppression that comes in any form or shape. Any entity that tolerates such malice and repression internally can never redeem the Tamil people.’ (p.243)”

It is hard to read *Puthiyathor Ulagam* without being struck by its enduring relevance. Govinthan’s is a voice that calls out for a homegrown, principled, people’s struggle that embraces broader, more meaningful conceptions of freedom and liberation. He, thus, presents a radical alternative to popular Tamil politics that has historically banked on external interventions for inspiration.

**Elijah Hoole**

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\*<http://groundviews.org/2015/10/06/the-enduring-relevance-of-puthiyathor-ulagam/>