The Vanishing Young and the Silent Agony of Sunset Shore
(Paduvankarai)

1. The LTTE–Controlled Areas: Some Singular Developments

Most of the developments were not unexpected, and yet some are remarkable. In the Vanni itself, recruitment by the LTTE has, even more, taken on the characteristics of abduction. A typical scene was outside the Madhu Church camp, where Fr. Selvarajah who is in charge has been notably strict in preventing LTTE activity inside the premises. However, the refugee children have to attend school outside the camp.

Recently, children returning from school were confronted by LTTE recruiters having a white van with tinted glasses parked nearby. Individual children were cornered by groups of recruiters. Expressions of reluctance by the children were met by the recruiters with severe abuse. Teachers passing by were helpless witnesses to this press-ganging. A child showing the slightest sign of weakness was loaded into the white van. Those caught were then spirited away into the unknown, leaving the parents completely in the dark.

In earlier years, as recently as to 1996 in Jaffna, the white van with tinted glasses struck terror into the hearts of Tamil civilians as the symbol of abduction teams of state agencies, whose victims joined the ranks of the ‘disappeared’. That the LTTE should use the same menacing symbolism for a different category of ‘disappeared’ has carried a strong message on the futility of seeking the children taken away. Frequently, the saga comes to a close many months later, with the LTTE bringing home a sealed coffin containing organic matter.

Other similarities to the practices of the State too have recently been in evidence. The LTTE cleared jungle and shrub on both sides of roads frequently used by LTTE vehicles. Some of these areas are now said to ‘look like a playing field’. This followed reports since Spring of mine attacks on LTTE personages moving in vehicles. But many doubt the State’s capacity to mount such attacks. The result is a distinct impression among the people that there is a crack within the LTTE. They have also noticed coming from within some subtle propaganda against the top leadership. However, LTTE members have told some people that acts of sabotage are...
being committed by some other group with local help. They had reportedly dug up several mines. There is some mystery here since confusion about its iron-like control is a state of affairs the LTTE leadership would neither allow nor, least of all, admit. Nevertheless, despite an outward air of brazen confidence, supported by the successful suicide attack on Katunayake Airbase and International Airport on 24th July, there is an air of desperation in the LTTE’s current recruitment drive.

The LTTE appears dissatisfied with the results of earlier methods of recruitment involving martial propaganda and psychological pressure. Currently in the Vanni, LTTE loudspeakers blare propaganda in the evenings till late, and again in the mornings, making it impossible for children to study. What has created unprecedented alarm among civilians, however, is the high-handedness of recruiters in the interior of the Batticaloa District. Meetings in villages have been addressed by senior leaders including Karikalan, Robert and Ramanan.

2. Fiction and Fact in Paduvankarai

From early August 2001, there were in the Batticaloa District families regularly moving from the LTTE-controlled area, Paduvankarai (Sunset Shore) in the western interior and Vaharai, to stay with relatives in the army-controlled area. The Sunday Virakesari of 12th August, carried an astonishing report by a regular columnist who often writes on the East. Quoting wireless services ‘based in the West’, he claimed that at the temple in Arasaditivu, 43 sons were handed over by parents to the LTTE after a benediction conferring on them a ‘commission of heroic endeavour’ (Vettithilakam). It is well-known that the same coterie of local correspondents feed Tamil radio stations in the West, although the writer distanced himself from the report by citing an ‘echo’.

The ‘echo’ also found expression in the Uthayan published in Jaffna and came to be spread by word of mouth as parents in the East voluntarily handing over their children to the LTTE en masse. Such stories are systematically concocted and relayed by Tamil pressmen and others who have escaped to urban centres, and who in their wildest dreams would not let their children go anywhere near the LTTE. The dreadful reality reveals once more the deep schisms by which the Tamil community has been divided, and fenced with fantasies, to facilitate manipulation by a fascist agency.

The true state of affairs is that in recent meetings in the interior of the Batticaloa District, LTTE leaders have made draconian demands. They have demanded, often from temple premises, that each family should submit one or two of their children to the movement. The old slogan trotted out many times in past years is again being repeated – that this is to be their final battle, and they had plenty of weapons, but not enough fighters.

This has been, however, the first time that virtual conscription was openly decreed. The penalty for families that did not comply is that their properties will be seized and their lands eventually given to ‘martyr’ families. In effect, the families not complying would be left vagrants, forfeiting their means and livelihood. The properties of those who fled the LTTE controlled area have already been officially sealed and confiscated.

Far from the impression that the Tamil media have attempted to convey, the LTTE’s actions have created a state of utter bewilderment and horror among the population. Leaders of civil society and religious leaders who have over the years become inured to recruitment of children by the LTTE, have expressed alarm in their private councils. This has also to do with a class of parents in relatively more stable circumstances feeling the pinch of LTTE recruitment, as they
A token of a change of approach was evident when LTTE recruiters failed to target the Thanthamalai and Karadiyanaru Hindu festivals of early Summer. A large number of devotees go to the LTTE controlled area for the festivals. Those whom the LTTE netted during such occasions were often from insecure homes – that were largely the result of war, death and economic deprivation. In such cases the parents had no voice and largely bore their grief in silence.

The better-off frequently lived in the belief that their children would not be induced to join by LTTE propaganda. Many of them sent their children to schools in the government–controlled zone, such as to those in Batticaloa or Kalmunai. The LTTE’s new policy of recruitment left all parents, irrespective of means and position, with no avenues for escape. All hope of escaping or of retrieving their child has been denied. It is this that made the crucial difference.

Our sources in these areas tell a heart-rending story completely at variance with the ‘echoes’ reported exclusively in the Tamil media - that parents were handing over their children to the LTTE at temples with enthusiasm and ceremony. The truth is that the parents were left broken and prostrate. It was left to the children to take the initiative and solve their problem. As usual among rural folk, it was often the case of a younger boy or girl volunteering to go, reasoning out that the elder son or daughter would be more useful to the parents at home.

Once again we are witness to a dismal feature in Tamil society, whereby this use of crass thuggery by the LTTE is explained away. An argument put forward in circles not directly affected by this conscription, is that the Government, which is not interested in peace, has forced the LTTE to fight this war. Moreover, they argue, since conscription is admitted in Western democracies for national defence, the LTTE cannot be blamed too much. This is a perception constantly drummed out by the Tamil media and elite.

However, deep down, Tamils who have experienced the LTTE in close proximity are cynical about the LTTE’s peaceable intentions. But many of them give credence to falsehoods as an easy means of justifying their own passive complicity in a series of outrages against the people.

Nevertheless, a larger share of the blame rests with the Sinhalese polity in general and the two main political parties – the PA and the UNP – in particular. For more than four decades they have been unable to do anything decisive to convince the ordinary Tamil, the school-teacher and priest on the ground, that they are committed to a just political settlement to the grievances of the Tamils. Instead, the regular experience of the Tamil people - the unpunished violations by the State, reflexive aerial bombing after a strike by the Tigers and the occasional cow-hand deliberately killed by an army patrol - easily support the oft repeated proposition that the Government’s intentions are baneful.

A continuation of this state of affairs would be suicidal for Sri Lanka and suicidal for the Tamil people. We give below a comprehensive picture of the situation in Paduvankarai (Western Shore of the Lagoon) and Vaharai.

3. Report on the Situation

**Early Signs:** During May and June this year the LTTE, using local thugs, orchestrated attacks on two evangelical Christian groups in Panichchankerni, near Vaharai. These groups were firmly pacifist and were opposed to military service. This incident will be dealt with more fully in the next bulletin.
There were two major Hindu festivals in the LTTE-controlled area – Thanthamalai in July and Karadiyanaru in early August. Large numbers of devotees, young and old, went through army checkpoints to attend these festivals. Vehicles and vendors were seen in large numbers. Looking back, the fact that LTTE recruiters did not target the young on these occasions, unlike in previous years, was the sign of change in the air.

**The Recruitment Drive:** From about the second week of August, LTTE political leaders showed action videos and conducted meetings on Saturdays and Sundays in all areas including Vaharai, Pattipalai, Vellaveli, Vavunativu, Ambalanturai, Munaikkadu, Kokkadichcholai, Kadukkamunai, Palugamam, Porativu, Munaitivu and Pankuda Veli.

Generally, after the meetings LTTE-appointed village headmen, with LTTE personnel, fanned out going house by house, demanding a member for the ‘final battle’. Compulsory military training is also being enforced, with elders and government servants having to do 1 hour a day. Hundreds have been taken for full-time military activity – in the region of a hundred or more in most areas mentioned above, making a total so far of about 1500.

In the area of Palugamam, Porativu and Munaitivu, many are government servants, educated unemployed, jewellers or students in high school or university. A number of them called a meeting with the LTTE and pointed out that they had generally helped the LTTE financially or otherwise, and many had been arrested by the Army. Moreover, they pointed out, many of them are resident outside for work or study. Initially it was believed that a compromise was struck between the people and the LTTE. But this is not borne out by subsequent reports.

In the poorer areas around Valaichenai, including Vaharai, the LTTE for some time prevented many who work as labourers in the army-controlled area from leaving, so as to facilitate compulsory training. Recruitment in this area appears to have taken even cruder forms.

Vaharai is about the poorest and most deprived area in the district. Following a propaganda meeting in the area, the trailer of a tractor used by the LTTE was loaded with children, despite the fervent protestations of the mothers. The mothers ran after the tractor when it took off. LTTE personnel then levelled their guns at the mothers threateningly to turn them back.

**4. A Funereal Atmosphere**

A witness described the atmosphere in Valaichenai North, including Vaharai, Puliankandaladi and Vellaiadimadu as ‘a strange emptiness with people huddling in their houses with their children’. Reports from elsewhere have been similar. The Thanthodreesvarar temple festival was held in Kokkadichcholai on 20th August and the Roman Catholic festival at the shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour at Aithiyamalai on 2nd September. These festivals traditionally draw huge crowds. This year too public transport was provided, with buses plying from places such as Mandur. But by comparison, the pilgrims this year were a small trickle and were mainly women past their youth.

As soon as the LTTE came to a home and demanded a child, the atmosphere instantly changed to one of a funeral. Led by the father and mother, the family began wailing as though the corpse of a loved one were in the house. Usually the LTTE gave them two days to produce a child before them or forfeit their property. After two days they would call home again and perhaps give them a further three days. In several instances where the parents refused outright, they were allowed to take their children and leave for the army-controlled area, forfeiting everything except what they were wearing.
In many instances the LTTE recruiters were persistent. Mothers who talked back were humiliated. The wife of Kanagesweran (Kanakanayagam?), the 50 year old orderly at the government dispensary in Palugamam, who talked back to the recruiters was forced to perform *thopukaranams* (squatting and standing in turn, holding the ears with crossed hands). Her son and daughter were then taken away by the LTTE. The orderly who then attempted to commit suicide by swallowing poison was warded at the ICU in Batticaloa Hospital on 11.9.2001 (discharged 19.9.)

In the Kokkadichcholai area, about three mothers who showed strong resistance have been locked up. The number of such instances is enormous and every person has a story involving a close relative. A man from Palugamam spoke of the LTTE holding his sister in custody to hand over her daughter. A government employee from Aithiyamalai said that his cousin’s husband was being held captive to release one of his sons, who in turn are bitter about the way their father was treated. (How many such boys and girls who are bitterly disillusioned with the LTTE are forced to serve out their fate in the LTTE?) In Palugamam there was angry resistance to the LTTE’s imposition and many parents are being held in custody.

A government employee in Batticaloa from Palugamam was known to be close to the LTTE and was reputed for carrying messages and intelligence. However this time the LTTE has placed him in custody, demanding an elder son. If he did not comply, they have threatened to take away his 7 year old son.

There is fear of getting involved even when the problem concerns the immediate family. A man’s sister who is a CARE volunteer has been taken away by the LTTE. From that day his mother has been crying, pleading with him to do something. However, he is afraid, to go and talk to the LTTE because he has four children of his own.

There have been a number of suicides and attempted suicides by distraught parents during this recruitment drive as hinted above. One of those who committed suicide by taking poison is the postal peon in Kokkadichcholai. Another who attempted suicide and is warded in Batticaloa Hospital is Mr. Vellimalai from the Mandur area, who was a Tamil Congress candidate at the parliamentary elections concluded in 2000. Both of them lost a son or daughter to the LTTE. This is just the tip of the iceberg. The full picture will never emerge. Such incidents take place all the time and are nearly always covered up. Only, this time, it has become a minor epidemic.

To give some idea of the magnitude of such instances, a government employee from Punnakkulam near Porativu was asked about his village. He said that he is personally aware of the suicides of the father and mother of a child, and the father of another child, both from his village, committing suicide after their children were taken away by the LTTE. For parents the slightest glimmer of self-doubt that they sacrificed a son or daughter to save their property would quickly explode into an unbearable pang of guilt.

A. Pathmavathy of Unnichchai, Karadiyanaru, took poison on 10.9.2001 after her son was forcibly taken away by the LTTE the previous night at 10.30 PM. She was admitted to Eravur hospital and discharged two days later. Sivanesan, the postal peon at Palugamam was admitted to Kaluwanchchikudy hospital after he attempted suicide about 12.9.2001, after his son was taken away by the LTTE.

Some of the children, who by these draconian measures were dragooned into the ranks of the LTTE, took it with an air of diffidence, often seen in those bowing to the inevitable. In Aithiyamalai, four girls ordained for military service got together, partook of a feast that they