
THE THIMPU TALKS: 1985

Sinhala-Tamil conflict and the India factor

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is essentially a post-colonial phenomenon. The inability - or unwillingness - of the Sinhalese ruling class to come to terms with the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious character of the island's society has been at the root of the growing ethnic and social divide in the country. While



Phase I at Thimpu: The two delegations, the Sri Lanka government's and the Tamil, across the table.

Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) has been limping from crisis to crisis, with worsening relations between communities, it was the July 1983 pogrom against the Tamils that became the defining factor in shaping the subsequent history of the island. The horrendous violence of that time caused such revulsions world-wide against Sri Lanka, and brought so much of international sympathy to the Tamils that Tamil militancy acquired a justification and a halo, particularly in Tamil Nadu. What was already an intractable problem involving two peoples became a clash of two ethno-nationalisms. The Jayewardene government's mishandling of the situation also led to the first open Indian intervention in Sri Lanka's affairs.

It has to be remembered that Indo-Sri Lankan relations had begun to sour even before the July '83 pogrom. A significant episode happened in New Delhi five days before violence erupted in the island - a matter that was largely forgotten in the rush of subsequent events. Sri Lanka's High Commissioner Bernard Tilakaratna was summoned to the Foreign Office by the Secretary in charge of the Sri Lanka Desk, Shankar Bajpai, and was told of India's concern **over happenings in Jaffna!** Particular reference was made to Regulation 15A of the Emergency Regulations under the Public Security Ordinance, a law that was operative in Jaffna permitting the disposal of dead bodies without inquests. According to reports that surfaced in the columns of the Colombo Press at that time, the surprised Sri Lankan envoy ventured to ask whether the "concern" was conveyed from Tamil Nadu? He was told, courteously of course, that the concern was expressed "at the highest political level": an obvious reference to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi herself.

The Sri Lankan Press, already abrasive in tone over suspected Indian involvement in hosting and training Tamil militants on Indian soil, now went into virtual hysterics on learning of the Delhi episode. An anti-India tirade followed, accusing India of "meddling in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka". "BIG BROTHER, SHUT UP", said one newspaper.¹

The Colombo papers had a point. The invoking of Regulation 15A under the Public Security Ordinance was not something new. It was already in force in Jaffna four years earlier, when on 11 July, 1979 President Jayewardene imposed a State of Emergency in Jaffna and appointed

Brigadier T.I. Weeratunga in overall command in the peninsula.

The government had already introduced the "Proscribing of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and Other Similar Organisations Act, No.16 of 1978, limiting the period of proscription to one year. One year later, on 21 May 1979 it was found

necessary to bring another Bill, amending the earlier Act by substituting the words "two years" in place of "one year". But when it was discovered by July the same year that the exercise was becoming fruitless, it was decided to replace the earlier law proscribing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by a wider law - the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act. By continuously misguiding himself into thinking that if one law does not work, a tougher one will, President Jayewardene was constantly making laws in order to rule than respecting the Rule of Law. It was in that spirit that he issued the following decree to Brigadier T. I. "Bull" Weeratunge on 14 July 1979:-

"It will be your duty to eliminate in accordance with the laws of the land the menace of terrorism in all its forms... this task has to be performed by you and completed before the 31st December 1979."

As to why Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi chose to pick on that widely-condemned regulation at that point of time to embarrass the Colombo government, in what was clearly an interference in an internal affair, perhaps affords a clue to one interesting fact: **India's special sensitivity to happenings in Jaffna.** It will be remembered that four years later, in May 1987, when Sri Lanka mounted *Operation Liberation* and took control of the northern Vadamatchchi region in the peninsula, it was again India (under Rajiv Gandhi this time) that stepped in to prevent a possible overrunning of Jaffna by the Sri Lankan forces. While Jaffna's geographical proximity and cultural affinity to Tamil Nadu might be an influencing factor in Indian policy calculations, it certainly reveals an entrenched behaviour pattern. Years later, the reactions of the Vajpayee government to events in Jaffna in May 2000 offers further insight into Indian thinking. According to an Indian report datelined New Delhi, 11 May 2000, "Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee told reporters in New Delhi that India will not recognise Tamil Eelam even if LTTE guerrillas drive out the Sri Lankan army from Jaffna town. He made it clear that India could intervene only if both the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE pressed for it, and **said there would be no change in the government's stand even if Jaffna fell into the hands of the Tamil rebels**".²

Even given the defeatist overreaction from Colombo to

the dramatic military successes of the LTTE in Jaffna in the month of May, no one would have seriously entertained the idea of the birth of a Tamil Eelam, merely on the fall of Jaffna; neither would have Mr. Vajpayee. What was really significant in Mr. Vajpayee's reported statement was his assertion that India would in no way help Sri Lanka in preventing Jaffna falling into the hands of the LTTE.

In the aftermath of the July '83 violence however, Indian intervention seemed, for several reasons, logical and inevitable. Firstly, there was domestic pressure from Tamil Nadu, with feelings in the state running high, and which the Centre could not afford to ignore. Indian nationals and Indian business houses in Colombo and elsewhere had been targeted in the attacks. There were those unwise overtures on the part of President Jayewardene seeking help from the United States and the West by pointedly ignoring India: a step that could open the way for external superpower involvement in the region and which would go counter to India's strategic interests. It was this that led to what was described as "Indira doctrine" : that India will not tolerate external intervention in a conflict situation in any South Asian country, if the intervention has any implicit or explicit anti-Indian implication. There was also, at a personal level, the prickly relationship between Mrs. Gandhi and Jayewardene, which did not help in smoothing out relations between the two countries. When Mrs. Gandhi telephoned Jayewardene to say that she was sending her External Affairs Minister Narasimha Rao to study the situation at first hand, the Sri Lankan leader could not possibly object. Mrs. Gandhi had anyway helped to avoid a crisis in Indo-Sri Lankan relations by affirming in a statement in Parliament India's commitment to Sri Lanka's independence, unity and integrity and that it had no intention of interfering in its internal affairs. She was only offering India's good offices to help reduce the tension in the island, restore confidence and help bring about a lasting settlement of the Tamil problem.³

In sending G. Parthasarathy as her special emissary to Sri Lanka, a person whom she described in Parliament as "one of our most distinguished and experienced diplomats", Mrs. Gandhi was no doubt genuinely concerned about bringing about a settlement that would meet the aspirations of the Tamils as represented by the leadership of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). But there was, from the very beginning of the Indian initiative, a question mark hovering over the intentions of the Sri Lankan patriarch. It became increasingly clear that he had accepted India's good offices only under duress and had always meant to scuttle the negotiation process. Blowing hot and cold over India's credentials, he told the *Sunday Times*, London (29 August) that he saw no role for India in the mediation process until Tamils gave up "secessionist demands" and wanted Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to keep her "hands off". The surprising aspect of this interview was that it was given on the eve of Parthasarathy's mission to Colombo.

He had also in the meantime taken another unwise step. In enacting in Parliament the Sixth Amendment to the Constitution making any profession of support for a separate state illegal, he virtually proscribed the TULF, a party that had come to Parliament with a mandate for a separate state at the 1977 elections. Dealing with the pliable "moderate" politicians in the TULF was surely the easier option for him than to face the ignominy of sitting at the same table with members of the military arm of Tamil resistance; which exactly was what happened at the Thimpu talks two years later. He averted that humiliation however, by sending his brother, who

had no official standing, instead of a member of the government.

While Mrs. Gandhi's peace initiative dragged on until end-1984 with no settlement in sight, President Jayewardene utilised that time to pursue his own private military agenda. During May-June of that year he visited no less than four world capitals. On 19 May, he was winging his way to Beijing, on 16 June he was in Washington, five days later in London and a few days later in Delhi. Russel Warren Howe reporting for the *Washington Post*, said:-

"President Junius Jayewardene of Sri Lanka, now on a two-day official visit here, is expected to plead with the United States to intervene in his country if India uses force to protect Sri Lanka's Tamil (Indian) minority from growing ethnic violence..."

In London, the *Sunday Times* (24 July) published a despatch from Mary Anne Weaver in Colombo, which said:-

"Sri Lanka's President J.R. Jayewardene flies to London this week to seek Mrs. Thatcher's support for his war against the "Tamil Tigers"... The president has already made an agreement with the Israeli intelligence organisation, Mossad, and has hired a group of mercenaries, veterans of the SAS to set up an intelligence organisation and a paramilitary force to combat the guerrilla threat. The Britons arrived in Sri Lanka from the Sultanate of Oman, to begin a year's training programme... Before Sri Lanka made its decision to hire mercenaries, it asked Britain and the United States to set up an anti-terrorist assistance programme to be run by the CIA and MI5. President Jayewardene has conceded that, because of pressure from large Tamil lobbies, London and Washington had turned down the request... The Mossad's help has proved "invaluable", according to Sri Lankan security forces. Physical conditions in the Jaffna peninsula are identical to those in the Gaza strip..."

How Jayewardene could afford to sit with a straight face, talking of a peace settlement with India's emissary G. Parthasarathy, while going round the world, using the bogey of an Indian invasion can be explained only by the deviousness he always practised in his political life. Anyway, by early 1984, Tamil militancy had begun to acquire new strength, and succeeding months saw the early stages of what was turning out to be a war of liberation. Unruffled by the stepped-up violence in the country and the undercurrents of hostility in Colombo, Parthasarathy went about with his quiet diplomacy which ultimately resulted in the set of proposals that came to be known as "Annexure C". This was presented to an All Parties Conference convened by President Jayewardene in January 1984. By inviting Buddhist monks also to participate in the talks - always an obstructive force in any attempt at settlement - Jayewardene ultimately pleaded that he could not carry Sinhala opinion with him into accepting the Parthasarathy proposals. In their view, he said, they feared that the proposals could clear the way for eventual separation. With that apologia, he wound up the meetings of the All Parties Conference, and stymied any further efforts by India to continue the negotiation process. Thus ended an year and a half long India's first intervention in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict: and thanklessly enough the first of many such failed interventions.

Towards Thimpu: 1985

If the 1983 pogrom could be put down as an aberration on the part of the Sri Lankan State, what followed thereafter was wilful, unqualified State terrorism. Since March 1984, there were several incidents when Sri Lankan armed forces opened fire at random in crowded Tamil areas. More than one hundred and fifty civilians, many of them women and children, perished in these attacks. In Mannar, when eight soldiers died in a mine blast in August, over sixty soldiers ran amok and set fire to hundreds of homes and shops. *THE ECONOMIST* (London) said in a report (18 August):-

“Sri Lanka’s northern capital, Jaffna, is like a medieval city infested by the plague. Nobody goes there without the most compelling of reasons. The locals stay at home most of the day and bolt their doors at nightfall. Fatalism is supplanting hope... For all the official denials, random acts of revenge by soldiers or riot policemen continue...”

The government itself seemed motivated by genocidal intent. Sinhala settlement of Tamil areas was intensified. Food supply to Tamil areas was curtailed. The Israeli Intelligence Service was lending overt support to the State.

On December 10 and 11, US special envoy General Walters had two days of “intensive talks” on the military solution with President Jayewardene, reported the government-owned *Daily News*, which also announced that there was a strong possibility of “Britain providing helicopters and patrol boats to overcome the terrorist menace”. On 31 December, the Colombo Sinhala newspaper the *Divaina*, quoting a government spokesman said five friendly countries, both Western and Socialist, have offered military aid to Sri Lanka, the aid to include fighter planes and ships. It was obvious that the government was getting confident that with the massive military assistance it was getting, it could go in for a military solution. But even as the Sri Lankan State was preparing the stage for an all-out onslaught on the Tamil people, armed resistance from within the Tamil nation was reaching new heights. The Colombo newspaper, *The Island*, fuelled existing tensions further when it ran a lead news item in its Sunday issue of 30 December, saying:-

“The Sri Lanka government is considering counter measures in the event of Eelamist groups making a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). Sources said that information had been received of such attempts being made by expatriate Tamil groups abroad. According to intelligence sources, the Eelamist strategy is to proclaim a new state called Eelam on Thai Pongal Day, January 14...”

Came Thai Pongal Day, 1985, and there were no signs of any UDI. It was either that some panic merchants or arms dealers had spread the story, or that the government itself had encouraged the hysteria in order to gain international sympathy. But as it happened during Jayewardene’s rule, with every passing year getting more dreadful than the previous one, 1985 proved no different.

The political scenario had itself changed dramatically by the beginning of the year. New political players had come into the centre court of power. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was no more, assassinated on 31 October the previous year. Eelam Tamils felt the loss deeply. Her son Rajiv Gandhi was installed in power. That marked the beginning of a more accommodative policy towards the Sri Lankan government.

On 9 February, 1985, there landed at Trivandrum (capital of the southern Indian state of Kerala) airport, a Zaire-owned DC aircraft, having run out of fuel. News agency UNI reported (quoting unnamed official sources) that authorities at Trivandrum initially agreed to refuel the aircraft, but later detained it after finding that it was loaded with arms and ammunition bound for Sri Lanka’s armed forces. Trivandrum officials had referred the matter to Delhi. Within 24 hours it was refuelled and cleared. Sri Lanka’s hawkish Minister for National Security Lalith Athulathmudali who had come for talks at Delhi told *Reuters* that the speedy despatch of the plane was a hopeful sign of better relations between the two countries. “I hope and trust this is an example of how relations are going to be managed”, he said. What hurt sentiments in Tamil Nadu more was the way Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, brushed aside DMK Rajya Sabha member V.Gopalasamy’s objection to the plane being given clearance with the sarcastic remark that there was nothing to indicate, as Mr.Gopalasamy alleged, that the arms were meant “to kill Tamils”. A further example of how “relations were going to be managed”, came on 3 March, when the Sri Lankan government made it known that Mrs. Gandhi’s emissary and veteran negotiator G.Parthasarathy’s “good offices” role was no longer acceptable: India obliged by sending Foreign Secretary Romesh Bhandari to Colombo on 24 March 24. Four days later, the Colombo newspaper, *The Island* commented: “Prominent Government personalities expressed satisfaction on India’s changed attitude towards the Sri Lankan Tamil problem, following the talks between Indian Foreign Secretary Romesh Bhandari and Sri Lankan leaders... informed sources said they felt there had been a positive change of attitude on the part of India with Mr.Bhandari as negotiator under the new Indian Premier Rajiv Gandhi as compared with Mr.Gopalaswami Parthasarathy as the Indian government envoy under Mrs.Indira Gandhi...”

Janardan Thakur writing in the *Times of India* on 26 March, said: “So charmed was President Jayewardene with India’s new “plenipotentiary” that he presented a dazzling necklace to Mrs. Bhandari. . . . The old policies on Sri Lanka lay in shambles; totally discredited, and with them the former man for Sri Lanka, G.Parthasarathy. It was forgotten that Mrs.Gandhi must have had some very good reason for the line she had followed...” Mrs Gandhi did have a good reason. The outstanding virtue of Mrs Gandhi’s policy was that she kept what was after all a Sri Lankan problem at a Sri Lankan distance. By restricting India’s role of one of providing “good offices” (while keeping other options open), she helped to bring the two parties to the dispute to the negotiating table, but always IN COLOMBO. Parthasarathy’s role was again a restricted one - to keep the talks progressing - in Colombo. This did not suit Mr Jayewardene, because the entire thrust of Sri Lankan policy was to make it appear to the world that the problem somehow was not on Sri Lankan soil, but on Indian soil!

Unfortunately, the over-zealous Boy Scout diplomacy that followed her death not only weakened the Tamil liberation struggle but also India’s own position. The problem was air-lifted from Colombo to New Delhi via Madras and ferried onwards to the third country, Bhutan. From what was India’s “good offices” role it assumed the proportions of a mediatory role, which entailed the building of a “neutral” mediator image, which finally ended in the clumsy and hurried deportation orders on three Tamil activists - Nadesan Satyendra, an active participant at the very Thimpu talks that India had staged; S A Balasingam, LTTE spokesman who did not go to Thimpu

and whose group was averse to the whole exercise; and S C Chandrasekaran, who was given a “raw” deal despite his close interaction with India’s own official quarters.

Between January 1985 and July-August of that year when the Thimpu talks were held, there were two processes at work in Sri Lanka: while the government was equipping itself with military hardware, in preparation for a military showdown, it was at the same time meeting with several reverses on the military front. The West, which was wary of obliging President Jayewardene with the arms aid while Mrs. Gandhi’s initiative in promoting a political settlement lasted, had now begun to relax their stand. According to reports in *Jane’s Weekly*, and the government-owned Colombo Press, the following items were billed for purchase during January to May: Two twin-engined double aluminium hull “Dubar” coastal patrol craft equipped to carry missiles (from Israel); nine British-built “Cougar” naval boats; two British-built 46-seater Avros to transport troops; more patrol boats and T-56 assault rifles from China; and AK-47 and M-16 rifles from Pakistan.

But the more notable happenings during this period was the heightened Tamil militancy. In January, militants blew up a Colombo-bound train carrying army personnel near Murikandy. Twenty two soldiers were killed and 25 others seriously wounded. In February, they blasted the approach road to Gurunagar army camp in Jaffna, making movements of armed forces difficult. Subsequently the camp itself was abandoned. In March, the Kilinochchi police station came under attack. More daring was the attack on the Madawachchiya police station in the Sinhalese dominated Anuradhapura district. In April, the four active militant groups, the LTTE, EROS, TELO and EPRLF decided to function as a united front under the term “Eelam National Liberation Front” (ENLF). The Jaffna police station was stormed.... with the Tamil militancy getting bolder, the Sri Lankan armed forces responded by going on a rampage in the north in an orgy of civilian killings. In one incident about fifty Tamils were forcibly locked up inside the Valvettiturai community centre building and blasted alive with bombs. The Tamil militants countered this by shooting their way into the Buddhist holy town of Anuradhapura, halfway from Jaffna on the road to Colombo in an attack that sent shock waves in governmental circles. A despatch from a Sinhalese reporter, Dalton De Silva to the *Saudi Gazette* (18 May, 1985) said:-

“Disguised as soldiers, about 25 guerrillas drove through the sacred Buddhist city in a hijacked bus in broad daylight on Tuesday spraying bullets at random. By the time they melted into the jungles of a wild life park, 50 km away, at least 145 people were dead. And three days later, not a single assailant has been caught despite a combined manhunt launched by the army, navy and air force. The attack was the first major thrust into a majority Sinhalese area by guerrillas... If the terrorists

can attack Anuradhapura with impunity, there’s nothing to prevent them hitting Colombo, one resident in the capital said...”

The spiral of tit-for-tat violence continued. On the following day in Jaffna, Sinhala naval personnel boarded a civilian boat named “Kumudhini” off the islet of Nedunthivu, and axed and clubbed to death 48 men, women and children in a gruesome massacre. It was becoming clear that President Jayewardene was losing his grip on the situation. The Anuradhapura “invasion” was not just an act of terrorism. It was an assault on the Sinhala psyche. More pertinently, the incident had a direct bearing on the cease-fire announcement by the government paving the



Courtesy: Wijesoma, The Island, Colombo

way for the Thimpu talks. The first indication that Sri Lanka was seeking India’s co-operation in arriving at a political settlement with the Tamils came within two days of the Anuradhapura incident. Mr. Jayewardene’s foreign policy adviser, the ex-Press baron Esmond Wickremasinghe was rushed to Delhi on 16 May. On the 28th, Romesh Bhandari flew to Colombo, and on 1 June, Mr. Jayewardene himself arrived in Delhi. On 2 June, Prime Minister Gandhi and the President were reported to have had a 50-minute discussion without aides. Later, as a “gesture of South Asian solidarity”, the two leaders flew together to tour cyclone-ravaged areas in Bangladesh and to share the grief of President Ershard and his people. They had reportedly continued their talks on Sri Lanka on the flight to and from Dhaka. Michael Hamlyn reporting from Delhi for the *Times*, London, said that Mr Jayewardene was “smiling broadly as he flew back home after two days of talks”. Although both sides were silent on the content of the talks, it became known that the intention was to arrive at a cease-fire between the government and the militants. Minister Athulathmudali was quoted as saying : “Last year the general view was that, if you get a political solution, terrorism will wither. Today the view is that to get a political solution we must work towards a cessation of hostilities”. The task of persuading (or pressurising) the militants to accept the cease-fire was understood as the responsibility of the Indian government with the help of the Indian intelligence outfits.

On 18 June it was announced that the five militant groups had yielded to Indian pressure for an immediate cease-fire or as Minister Athulathmudali termed it “cessation of hostile activity”. The Liberation Tigers had apparently held out against it until the last moment before bowing to Indian pressure. The terms of the cease-fire envisaged a Four phase plan. Phase I was to start on 18 June and continue for three weeks, Phase II to continue for another three weeks, Phase III to consist of two weeks, in which police stations which had been closed down will be reopened and the law and order function to be carried out by the police. In addition, an amnesty will be declared and those in custody against whom charges have not been filed will

be released. Those who have been charged to be released after “the conclusion of successful discussions”. It was only during Phase IV that secret talks on substantive issues for reaching a political settlement were to take place between the emissaries of the Government and the representatives of the Tamil political leadership and the Tamil militant groups.

The terms of the cease-fire also stated: “The venue of these talks could be a third country acceptable to both sides. Every effort should be made to maintain the secrecy of these talks, and in any case, the course of these discussions. The search for a solid foundation for a political solution must be completed within a period of three months from the date of declaration of ceasefire and amnesty. Depending on the result of these secret talks, open and direct dialogue between the Government and the Tamils can commence as soon as the necessary groundwork is considered to have been laid”.

But as it happened, nothing seemed to work out in the way the whole process was envisaged. Although the “secret talks” were to begin only in Phase IV, the talks commenced at Thimpu, the Bhutanese capital on the 8th of July, during Phase I itself - at the instance of the Government of India. If the intention was to arrive at some “quick fix” solution, it was obviously a case of poor judgement.

The Talks and Failure

The Thimpu talks lasted two rounds. The first round of talks began on 8 July and ended on the 13th. The second phase of the talks was from 12 to 17 August. Leading the Sri Lankan delegation was a man who was not even part of the Colombo government. He was H W Jayewardene, a legal-constitutional expert, a Queen’s Counsel, and perhaps more importantly the President’s own brother. The very choice of a man without any political weight or share in the governance of the country gave a clue to President Jayewardene’s intentions. At no time during his 12-year rule did he lose faith in a military solution to settle the Tamil problem. His only interest was to buy time, first through the long drawn-out All Parties Conference which came to a pitiful end in December 1984 and now through the Thimpu charade.

Although the six Tamil groups at the conference table - the TULF, the LTTE, EROS, TELO, EPRLF and PLOTE had jointly given their endorsement to what came to be known as the four Thimpu principles, there were varying attitudes among them towards the entire exercise. The EROS and EPRLF, given their Marxian tendencies, had a preoccupation with theoretical principles, and it was the EPRLF delegate who read out the initial draft of the four principles at the end of the first round of talks - the 13th July. The TULF and PLOTE together gave Romesh Bhandari a supportive role. The LTTE stuck together with the TELO, the EROS and the EPRLF in showing a common face, perhaps for strategic reasons, but had no interest in the talks or any faith in the proceedings. LTTE leader Prabhakaran had refused to go to the Bhutanese capital, and even the two delegates who went were, according to an Indian journalist, there because they were “frog-marched” by the Indian Intelligence services, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and the Intelligence Bureau (IB).

The joint statement made by the Tamil delegation consisting of EPRLF, EROS, PLOT, LTTE, TELO and TULF on the concluding day of Phase I of the Thimpu talks on the 13th of July 1985, read as follows:-

“ It is our considered view that any meaningful solution to the Tamil national question must be based on the following four cardinal principles:

- (1) Recognition of the Tamils of Sri Lanka as a distinct nationality;**
- (2) Recognition of an identified Tamil homeland and the guarantee of its territorial integrity;**
- (3) Based on the above, recognition of the inalienable right of self-determination of the Tamil nation;**
- (4) Recognition of the right to full citizenship and fundamental democratic rights of all Tamils, who look upon the Island as their country.⁴**

The statement further said:-

“Different countries have fashioned different systems of government to ensure these principles. We have demanded and struggled for an independent Tamil state as the answer to this problem arising out of the denial of these basic rights of our people. The proposals put forward by the Sri Lankan delegation as their solution to this problem is totally unacceptable. Therefore we have rejected them as stated by us in our statement of the 12th of July 1985. However, in view of our earnest desire for peace, we are prepared to give consideration to any set of proposals, in keeping with the above mentioned principles, that the Sri Lankan government may place before us”.

It has to be noted that the phraseology used in the above mentioned four principles had undergone some change at the end of Phase II of the talks. The word “nation” was preferred to the term “nationality”, on the suggestion of the ENLF spokesman Nadesan Satyendra, who was not present during the first round of talks at Thimpu. While the authorship of the four cardinal principles lay certainly with the Tamil delegation, it was also believed that an Indian jurist sympathetic to the Tamil cause had been consulted in the drafting.

With India fearing that the talks between the two delegations were getting nowhere, Romesh Bhandari flew to Thimpu and spent two days in informal meetings with both delegations. It was then agreed that they would meet again on 12 August at Thimpu.

Meanwhile, tension was back in the air in Sri Lanka. All those involved were aware that time was running out, as the cease-fire that had brought relative peace and calm to the island was to end in mid-September. Tamil opinion in Jaffna which was already opposed to Tamil militant participation at Thimpu was suspicious that Jayewardene was using the 3-month cessation of hostilities to reinforce the security forces. It was public knowledge that the government was in the process of forming a 10,000 strong auxiliary force to fight along with the regular army.

When the second round of talks began on 12 August, the President’s brother Hector Jayewardene was back as the

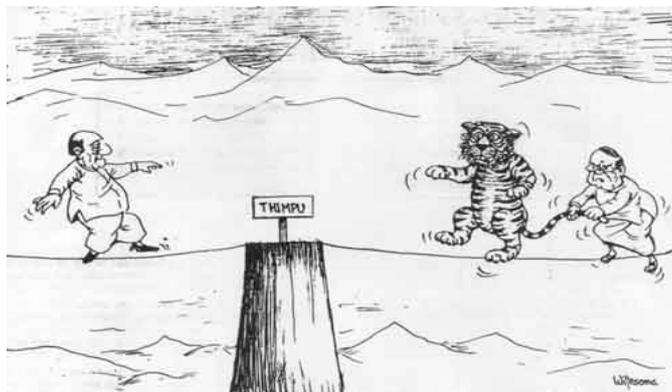
leader of the Sri Lankan delegation. In response to an Indian suggestion that the delegation should include politicians rather than legal experts, President Jayewardene countered saying that he had made his brother an ambassador and plenipotentiary with full powers to make decisions. The sessions began on an uncompromising note with Hector Jayewardene rejecting outright the four cardinal principles enunciated by the Tamil delegation. In a prepared statement, he said:- "if the first three principles are to be taken at their face value and given their accepted legal meaning, they are wholly unacceptable to the government. They must be rejected for the reason that they constitute a negation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka, they are detrimental to a united Sri Lanka and are inimical to the interests of the several communities, ethnic and religious in our country". Having thus rejected the first three principles out of hand, he questioned the right of the Tamil participants to raise the citizenship issue, which anyway, he claimed was being implemented. In addition, stringent conditions were stipulated for the implementation of any agreement reached at Thimpu. Mr Jayewardene, true to his name tried to hector the Tamil delegation with the following statement: "The implementation of any agreement reached at these talks requires as a pre-condition a complete renunciation of all forms of militant action. All militant groups in Sri Lanka must surrender their arms and equipment. All training camps whether in Sri Lanka or abroad must be closed down"⁵. That itself was enough to sour the atmosphere even in the bracing climate of the Himalayan kingdom! A swift adjournment of the talks followed. An ENLF spokesman said:- "The dialogue has also run into unnecessary difficulties because of the Sri Lankan delegation's refusal to discuss ceasefire violations. We asked for today's afternoon session of talks to be cancelled to give us time to prepare our reply and we will present it at tomorrow's meeting"⁶.

The talks dragged on till the 17th, sometimes in an acrimonious note, to which acrimony Indian Foreign Secretary Romesh Bhandari himself contributed a share. Ultimately, the Tamil delegation to a man walked out of the Thimpu talks on the 17th of August. Prior to walking out, they made the following statement:-

"We have stated in our response to the proposals made by the Sri Lankan government delegation on the 16th of August 1985, that there was one matter of some considerable importance to which we proposed to refer in a separate statement and we do so herein.

"As we have talked here in Thimpu, the genocidal intent of the Sri Lankan State has manifested itself in the continued killings of Tamils in their homelands. In the most recent incidents which have occurred during the past few days more than two hundred innocent Tamil civilians including young children, innocent of any crime other than that of being Tamils, have been killed by the Sri Lankan armed forces running amok in Vavuniya and elsewhere. It is farcical to continue peace talks at Thimpu when there is no peace and no security for the Tamil people in their homelands. We do not seek to

terminate the talks at Thimpu but our participation at these talks has now been rendered impossible by the conduct of the Sri Lankan State which has acted in violation of the ceasefire agreements which constituted the fundamental basis for the Thimpu talks".



Courtesy: Wijesoma, The Island, Colombo

There were several reasons why the Thimpu talks had to collapse. The ground situation back at home did not favour any non-emotional dialogue. Both the parties stuck to certain rigid positions with a yawning gap in between. President Jayewardene had no intention to resolve the dispute across the table, nor was the LTTE which had no

stomach for theoretical exercises and legalistic nuances. They had also read the past history of negotiations with Sinhalese governments correctly. Even the other militant organisations, once they had achieved their right to parley with the government on equal terms, had no further intention to be coerced by Indian intelligence services into compromising positions. It may be also said, that the very absence at Thimpu of LTTE leader Prabhakaran made the entire process unpromising.

Looking back, there were some positive features that came out of Thimpu. It was the first occasion when Tamil militant groups sat together with the Tamil political leadership to face the representatives of the government. It was the first time anyway, when despite their mutual differences, they managed to speak with one voice. More importantly, those four cardinal principles spelt out at Thimpu have now become part of the political vocabulary of our times: and indeed the bottom line demands on the Tamil question.

Notes:

1. *The Hindu, Madras, 22 July, 1983 July, and Colombo newspapers, 21 July, 1983*
2. *Asian Age, May, 12, 2000*
3. *The Hindu, Madras, September 16, 1983*
4. *Ketheshwaran Loganathan, a participant at the talks: Paper submitted at Lucerne meeting, July 1987, organised by International Alert. Published in "Negotiating Peace in Sri Lanka: Efforts, Failures & Lessons, ed. Kumar Rupesinghe, Feb. 1998.*
5. *ibid p.74*
6. *The Guardian, London, New Delhi report, August 13, 1985*

Appendices

Extracts from three Indian newspaper commentaries on the Thimpu talks, by three journalists, Anita Pratap, A-S-Abraham and Sadanand Menon:

1. *Anita Pratap in SUNDAY, Calcutta, Special Report, 1-7, September 1985*

"As the second phase of the Thimpu talks petered out, the Tamil militants seemed to be caught between the devil and the deep sea - a recalcitrant government back home and an Indian government that was apparently only interested in "an instant solution" to the island's ethnic crisis.

"The known enemy was the Sri Lankan government that was covertly "intent upon the extermination of the Tamils". Bitter historical experience had compelled the militants (who formed the Eelam National Liberation Front, ENLF) to believe that for the Sri Lanka government, the Thimpu talks were a fiendish charade where they could buy time by putting forward a jaded mockery of proposals for devolution of power to the Tamils, while strengthening their armed forces to ultimately opt for a military solution to the ethnic imbroglio. The predictable behavioural patterns of the Sri Lanka government did not cause them anxiety. They expected it and to that extent were psychologically prepared for it. But what has alarmed and dismayed them is the behaviour of the unknown friend, India.

"While they continue to have immense faith in Rajiv Gandhi, they are still apprehensive about the modus operandi of the intelligence agencies, namely the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and the Intelligence Bureau (IB) who are acting as intermediaries between the Indian government and the Tamils. For the first time the militants complained about the "undue pressure" they were subjected to by the agencies. Pressure has been building up on them ever since the summit meeting between Mr. Gandhi and Mr. Jayewardene this year, but it peaked on the night of 17 August after the Tamil delegation staged a walk-out in Thimpu. While Romesh Bhandari, Foreign Secretary has been given the responsibility of dealing with the Sri Lanka government, the agencies have been entrusted with the task of getting the militants to come to the negotiating table. In their zealotry to "do their duty" they have resorted to threats, blackmail! and arm twisting to get the militants back to the negotiating table. Surely the knuckledusters-and-lathi philosophy is grotesquely unsuited for solving intricate and sensitive political problems.....

2. *A S Abraham in the TIMES OF INDIA, 30 August 1985, under the headline - COLOMBO SET TO USE FORCE: NEUTRALISING INDIA KEY TO STRATEGY.*

"New Delhi's snafu over the deportation of two Tamil militant leaders (a third left the country before the deportation order could be served on him), reinforces the gloom engulfing not merely the reconciliation talks at Thimpu between the guerillas and the Sri Lanka government, but also the overall situation in Sri Lanka where the ethnic conflict is fast taking on the dimensions of a full-scale civil war.

"Although New Delhi is trying hard to put the talks back on an even keel, the chances of it succeeding are daily becoming more and more remote. If Thimpu is in danger of becoming little more than an innocuous side show to the bloodletting in Sri Lanka, for which the brutal rabble that passes for the Sri Lanka soldiery is mainly responsible, then that is because

both antagonist, the guerillas as well as Colombo, are busy preparing to settle the issue through the force of arms...

"Internal political rivalry is the name of the game in Sri Lanka, not finding a just and humane solution to the ethnic conflict. These difficulties however, only make it plainer than ever that Colombo has no stake in Thimpu. It is trying to impose a military solution which it knows cannot be accomplished without neutralizing India through seeming acquiescence in New Delhi's wishes. It is time New Delhi started to see Colombo's motives for what they are really are...

3. *Sadanand Menon in THE SUNDAY OBSERVER, Bombay, September 8, 1985*

Madras : A notable feature of the Eelam muddle of the past few weeks weeks which has pushed any conceivable solution to the Tamil nationality question troubling Sri Lanka to a distant horizon, has been the bull-in-the-China-shop diplomacy of India. And the bull is none other than foreign secretary Romesh Bhandari - so say Tamil groups who were at Thimpu II.

"According to one of the Tamil participants at Thimpu II, many of his delegation had broken down and wept as they heard BBC reports of the massacre of over 300 Tamils in Vavuniya and Trincomalee... As the talks began, the Lanka delegation's superciliousness in questioning the representative status of the Tamil delegation and their "sarcastic" and "cynical" remarks on the notion of "Tamil homelands" had raised the hackles of the Tamil delegation... It was in the midst of all this civility that news came of the killing of Tamil civilians which immediately amalgamated the Tamil delegation into one united group and hastened their resolve to walk out.

"Romesh Bhandari, fresh from a road accident, was rushed to Thimpu, plastered nose and all, and he launched a tirade against the Tamil delegation - a speech liberally laced with epithets like "bloody", and "what the hell". Though smarting under this patronising "scolding", the youngsters in the Tamil delegation took it all silently, but at one point, the "new face" in the team representing TELO, 53-year old N. Satyendra, whom Bhandari had not met before and who was an unknown factor even within the ENLF circles, abandoned his restraint and told Bhandari, "Stop this stupid talk. We are not here to learn lessons from you". He insisted that Bhandari apologise and withdraw words like "bloody" used in reference to the Tamil groups. Satyendra said:- "Mr .Bhandari should realise that at Thimpu we are not just anybody but the representatives of a nation and a people and expected to be treated at least with minimum protocol and courtesy. This is no way to proceed with a negotiation.". This in turn prompted Bhandari to walk off in a huff exclaiming, "May be you want to teach me lessons now".

"The ENLF delegates were particularly offended that Bhandari had not shown any inclination to protest against the massacre of Tamils in Sri Lanka. Other delegates would have pitched into the fray of the verbal slanging match had not TULF's Amirthalingam and PLOT's Vasudeva tried to mend fences by apologising on behalf of the Tamil delegation to Bhandari....

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