

'The LTTE is a unique case'



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An acknowledged authority on conflicts in Sri Lanka and the subcontinent, he has written extensively on ethnic politics, political violence, human rights, and conflict resolution. He has also worked closely with the Sri Lanka government on conflict resolution, peace negotiations and constitutional reform, and was involved in drafting the model constitution in 1999.

As a student-activist of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna movement in the '70s, he was arrested and imprisoned by the government. On his release after a change of regime, he went on to do his doctoral research in the University of Hawaii on 'Nationalism and State Formation in Bangladesh'.

Actively involved with other subregional organisations engaged in peace and conflict resolution studies in South Asia, he has authored *Sri Lanka: Modernity, Social Change and Claims of Justice*, *Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation*, and co-edited *Sri Lanka's Peace Process, Critical Perspective, Essays in Constitutional Reform*, and *Matters of Violence, Reflections on Social and Political Violence in Sri Lanka*.

In an exclusive interview in Colombo, he explains the roots of the current conflict to Managing Editor **Sheela Bhatt**.

What are the factors contributing to the current phase of violence?

One of the major reasons is the failures of the peace initiatives of 2002 which have come to an end, and new initiatives have to be begun. The period between the 2002 when the peace process began, to the period when new initiatives should have begun has remained undefined. It has created uncertainty. In the process violence and limited war have become defining factors.

Some critics say the new government led by President Mahinda Rajapakse is diluting the idea of federal structure for Sri Lanka, which the previous government was considering. Has this change of approach contributed to the violence?

This is not correct. Even the previous government which started this negotiation in 2002 didn't have a clear political agenda or a roadmap of the outcome of negotiations with the LTTE. The LTTE thought they could have an interim administration in the Northern and Eastern parts of Sri Lanka. [But] The United National Front government which negotiated with the LTTE didn't share the latter's position. They thought they should not give as much extensive regional autonomy to LTTE as the LTTE had expected. The peace process collapsed when the LTTE was still talking to the previous UNF government in 2003. The present government has come into power in the wake of the collapse of the 2002 peace process.

The challenge before the present government is to initiate the new peace process. I don't think the present Sri Lankan government is in a position to take any of the fresh new set of political initiatives which are necessary to reinvigorate or reconstitute the peace process.

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Why do you think so?

Let us look at the vision of a political settlement put forward by the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. The LTTE's vision of political settlement, even an internal political settlement, would be one that would be defined within the framework of extensive regional autonomy that would go far beyond the existing 1978 Constitution. But the present government wants to work this out within the 1978 Constitution. The existing Constitution defines the Sri Lankan State as a unitary state, while the LTTE's vision of a solution is far beyond even the conventional notion of federalism.

Conventionally, in federalism a political arrangement of regional autonomy exists within the framework of the Constitution with a firm central government and relatively small regional entities. But the LTTE vision is quite different: they want a Central government, but they [also] want the North-East regional entity that should go far beyond conventional regional autonomy. The LTTE wants that the regional entity should have the right to maintain their military institutions and establishments.

The argument forwarded by the LTTE is that until the terms of full and final settlement is fully and comprehensively implemented, there is no guarantee that the State run by the Sinhalese ruling class would honour the terms of agreement. The point here is that

the LTTE is for maximalist regional autonomy and the government of Sri Lanka is for minimalist degree of regional autonomy. There is a vast gap between the visions of the two sides.

So when shall the twain meet?

It is very difficult. That's why one has to think about the political settlement of the Sri Lanka crisis as a prolonged and protracted one. It should be a protracted peace dialogue. The peace process should be for an interim settlement rather than a big-bang solution of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. We may have to go through a series of interim managements.

There is an assessment that LTTE chief V Prabhakaran thinks this is the last leg of his battle, and his time is up now. And that's why he is showing more vigour in struggling with the current situation. Is he in "do or die" kind of a situation?

No, I am not sure about it because I haven't met Prabhakaran. But looking at the LTTE's political statements and behaviour I would say the LTTE today is no longer what it was in 1987 or 1990. My own understanding of the LTTE is that it is seriously interested and committed to what one may describe as the nation-building and State-building. They are not interested in political and military suicide, like the Al Qaeda.

Do you mean to say the LTTE is not interested in a division of Sri Lanka, and could settle for something that could be termed as a little less than independence?

I would put it like this. I think the LTTE knows that a separate, mono-ethnic mini-State in South Asia is not feasible. They know it very well. The LTTE understands that Bangladesh is the last nation state that came out in South Asia. The LTTE is quite shrewd in understanding regional and global geo-politics.

So where are they driving at, then?

They are driving at a regional subnational State in Sri Lanka which they can call Tamil Eelam, but it may not be a separate State.

Do we have any such division anywhere in the world to follow as an example?

I don't think so. That's why the LTTE is a unique case. Due to the geopolitics of the region and the globe, the LTTE knows that a separate State is no longer feasible. They want a subnational state which should be a part of a larger configuration of Sri Lanka.

Will the Sinhalese accept such an idea?

The Sinhalese will find it extremely difficult to accept this [*idea*].

Part 2

'India can make or break peace in Sri Lanka'

August 25, 2006 **I**n the second part of his interview, **Jayadeva Uyangoda**, Professor and Head, Department of Political Science and Public Policy, University of Colombo and Founder-Director of the Centre for Policy Research and Analysis, explains to Managing Editor **Sheela Bhatt** why he thinks the ethnic conflict will take time to resolve, and the role India can play.

When do you see the conflict ending in Sri Lanka?

There is no early solution to the Sri Lanka problem because, as I said, LTTE has maximalist political agenda of regional autonomy and the Sinhalese political class has a minimalist political agenda for regional autonomy. This the challenge which India, which is a player in the region in a big way, should understand. I have a feeling that neither India nor international community understands the extreme layers of complexity of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict.

What is it that India and the world community cannot understand?

Sri Lanka's complexity is something like this: you have a majority ruling class which is not yet ready to work out the settlement that would give equality to the ethnic minority of Sri Lanka. Second, they do not, they cannot, acknowledge and accommodate the minimalist position presented by even the non-LTTE Tamil groups. These old Tamil forces also say that settlement of conflict

requires enrichment and rearrangement of regional autonomy that should go far beyond the 13th amendment of the Sri Lankan Constitution that was imposed by the Indians in 1987.

So what is the answer?

Any workable solution will require recognition that Tamils are a distinct community and the North and East will require what we may call asymmetrical autonomy. And that is not yet recognized in Sri Lanka. You know, the most advanced Sinhalese politicians would say that when provincial powers are given to the Northern region, where Tamils are in a majority, and the Eastern region where Muslims and Tamils are dominating, they should have equal powers as the rest of the areas in the country. But that idea won't work. And the Sinhalese have not even agreed to those equal powers.

In the last 20 years Indian federalism has come to recognize some asymmetrical autonomy. Look at the North-east and Jammu and Kashmir, India is redefining internal boundaries without any problems. The Sinhalese political class is not yet ready for the radical reconstitution of the State power structure. A final solution of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict requires reconstitution of the post-colonial unitary State. I don't know whether it will be with the LTTE or without them but even after 25 years of conflict the Sinhalese political class have not come to that stage yet.

How many more people will die before that understating comes?

That's the tragedy, the fundamental issue. Many more people will have to die for the Sinhalese political class to understand that Sri Lanka needs radical reconstitution of State powers. Protracted ethnic conflict always requires a protracted peace process. That's why perhaps, initially, one has to have an incomplete and imperfect peace process. Some may call it negative peace. We need a credible ceasefire agreement to begin with.

How has violence changed your society?

Violence has become a part of Sri Lankan society. It's very difficult to see how Sri Lanka can extricate itself from this culture of violence. At the political, cultural levels we have become a violent State. We are a highly militarized State. The counter State movements like JVP and LTTE are equally violent. We have no moral qualms in using violence. We have a great level of individual violence in Sri Lanka. Individuals have turned violence against themselves. There is high level of community violence. Unfortunately, we have internalized violence.

Surprising, because Buddhism, the majority religion, is based on non-violence.

We have Buddhism which has been highly politicised. There is a contradiction between what is preached and what is practiced. It's a paradox of Sri Lanka. Every Sri Lankan is flabbergasted and intrigued by the obvious dichotomy of compassion preached in our religion and extreme violence that defines every day of Sinhalese life.

What kind of a role does India have in Sri Lanka?

India can make or break peace in Sri Lanka. India is a part of Sri Lanka's conflict as well as its solution. It's involved since 1980. I am not only talking about the training of the LTTE by India. This conflict is Sri Lanka's problem but its solution will be a South Asian solution.

As I said earlier, the Tamil nationalist project is to get maximum and extensive regional autonomy, more than the North-east provinces as an alternative to a separate state. But the Sinhalese fear that the moment you give regional autonomy to Tamils it will be a stepping stone to separation. What it means is that Sinhalese want political guarantees, while the Tamils and LTTE believe that no agreement will be fully implemented by the Sinhalese political class. They quote past experiences.

The LTTE thinks that the armed struggle, military equilibrium with Sri Lankan army and the strategic equilibrium with Sri Lankan State will only guarantee negotiations and implementation of any peace settlement. The LTTE thinks that political guarantee given within Sri Lanka won't work, it has to come from outside. That political and security guarantee can't come from US, Japan or France but from South Asia.

In the case of the Mozambique peace agreement the guarantee came from the South African region. India will have to be very careful in their engagements in Sri Lanka. There will be a lot of resistance among Sinhalese nationalist forces against India's engagement again. India has the 1987 experience before it that suggested that no solution can be imposed from outside. It has to come from within, and India should facilitate the solution. The LTTE is for normalization of its relations with India. Sri Lanka is also watching carefully the developments in South India. Initially [*when the Congress led government was formed in New Delhi*] many believed that India will back military action against the Tigers, and now Sinhalese nationalists are a little disappointed that it is not going to happen.

In the fast changing global scenario, how long can the LTTE strategy survive?

As far as I understand, the LTTE is not going to allow the Sri Lankan State any regional or global military alliance to destroy what

they consider as achievements of the Tamil liberation struggle. Eventually, the LTTE wants a political strategy to work for a Tamil regional sub-state.

Do you read more into US interests in the issue?

I don't think the US will back any military solution for the Sri Lankan problem. It seems the US policy is now to back India in its policy in Sri Lanka.

How do you read Prabhakaran's current state of mind? Is he a despot with a paranoid mind?

It's difficult to describe him. He is a man with a historical sense. He thinks that he is a person who can deliver political freedom to the Tamil nation. He thinks that he can manipulate his military strength and political strategies to get it. I think he is a great manipulator. He is a very clever military and political strategist. I don't know where or when or why he will fail. To say anything about Prabhakaran is utterly controversial. It creates massive reaction. When I say anything about Prabhakaran I have to think 100 times. Before I speak I have to remember that I have to live in Colombo.