
FINAL DAY OF PRABHAKARAN

1

EVEN DURING THE last days of his life, Velupillai Prabhakaran remained a deadly thorn for the Sri Lankan State.

The government was supremely confident as 2009 dawned that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its founder-leader Prabhakaran would soon be history. Although it was steadily losing ground and withdrawing to what in the end would be a small but heavily populated coastal corner of Mullaitivu district hugging the Indian Ocean, the never-say-die LTTE and its supporters felt they could still reverse the unprecedented battlefield setbacks.

But this optimism began to seriously waver as the horrific and increasingly one-sided war entered the fateful months of April and May, making the LTTE leadership desperate and realise-perhaps for the first time that it finally had its back to the wall. The Sri Lankan military, poised for the final kill, continued its punishing offensive, firing away unending numbers of shells and multibarrel rockets from launch vehicles, tearing through the rapidly depleting ranks of the once intimidating LTTE.

S, who was caught up in the narrow strip of land teeming with LTTE fighters and a mass of Tamil civilians, recalls those blood-curdling final months and weeks of war with horror.¹ "It is impossible to describe the death and destruction that rained on Tamils those days," the Tamil man said in a telephonic interview from the small town of Mullaitivu where he still lives with his family.

"At one point, the army was firing away shells and mortars from all directions while the air force was bombing endlessly from the sky. There was no place to hide. It was all providence. The lucky survived in one piece, the others met a horrific death. Numerous people were badly injured. I saw people lose their limbs and getting reduced to barely living beings," he said.

"There was no medical help. Some people simply bled to death, groaning in pain. The LTTE did what it could to help but the Tigers too were getting badly hit. The only difference between the Tigers and the ordinary Tamil folks was that the LTTE could hit back at the Sri Lankan forces, although the civilians could not."

While the LTTE kept fighting, its stock of arms and ammunition was rapidly depleting. Fresh supplies of weaponry had ceased reaching the zone for weeks. It was in April that S noticed that the lower echelons in the LTTE were beginning to look lost and frightened.

"For the first time, I saw shadows of fear on the faces of LTTE fighters," he recounted. "As someone who had seen the LTTE from close quarters for many, many years, this was a new phenomenon. This was the moment I came to the painful conclusion that this was now a lost cause."

S was not the only one to deduce that a war which at one time had left Sri Lanka virtually split into two may be nearing its gory end. The painful reality was also dawning on the man who can be credited with having started it all-Velupillai Prabhakaran.

UNLUCKY EIGHT

It was on 17 May that Prabhakaran made a rare admission to his confidants that must have immensely distressed him. It would have also stunned his listeners like perhaps nothing else in about three long decades.

The LTTE chief decreed that while he would never desert the battlefield and never surrender, whoever wanted to call it quits was free to do so. Those who desired to mingle with the civilians could go ahead after leaving behind their weapons. Those who wanted to kill themselves to avoid falling in the hands of the enemy could bite their cyanide vials. Of course, those who wanted to battle on must keep fighting without giving up. "Go and merge with the civilians. But remember, never betray the Tamil land and the Tamil people," a former LTTE fighter recalled Prabhakaran as saying.

It was a pathetic and heart-wrenching virtual farewell from a man who was seen by scores of his fanatical followers as a Sun God who would never go down, one who had vowed not to rest until he had carved out a Tamil homeland from Sri Lanka. All those who heard Prabhakaran's abject words were broken from within.

It may not have been a coincidence that Prabhakaran chose to say what he did on 17 May. Right from the time Tamil militancy started taking roots in Jaffna in the early 1970s when Prabhakaran was an unknown figure in the Tamil heartland, he saw the number eight as unlucky. According to a former LTTE member who was Prabhakaran's buddy in the 1970s and 80s, Prabhakaran avoided doing anything that could even remotely land him in trouble on the 8th, 17th and 26th of every month-since each date added up to eight. So staunch was his belief that he spent the whole of the 8th, 17th and 26th every month during those years holed up in a hideout, emerging only at dawn the next day. This was also the reason why, although the LTTE had supposedly 10 training sessions in Tamil Nadu in the 1980s, there were, in fact, only nine training capsules as session number eight was deliberately not held. Although this superstitious belief warned in later years, it is

possible a certain fatalism could have enveloped the LTTE chief when he decided, amid the worsening bloodbath, to speak his mind out on 17 May 2009.

Prabhakaran's dramatic U-turn a far cry. from his earlier bombastic claims that the war for an independent Tamil Eelam would go on even if the top leaders perished was not without basis. From January 2008, when the Sri Lankan government abrogated the ceasefire agreement (CFA) signed with the Tigers six years previously, the LTTE had been rapidly losing ground. The northwestern district of Mannar fell to the Sri Lankan military in April 2008, followed by the strategically important rebel stronghold, Pooneryn, as well as Mankulam in November.

If the battlefield losses were not enough, a most unexpected event took place in May 2008. Kandiah Balasegaran alias Balraj, one of the LTTE's most experienced and respected military leaders, died of a heart attack. Before his death Balraj was in Colombo at the Nawaloka Hospital, under heavy military protection, unfortunately on the floor below to his floor was TELO chief M.K.Sivajalingam assaulted by the E.P.D.P boys in Mandathew. He was taking

treatment medicine for his wounded legs. Both parties were unaware of each others position at the hospital. M.K.Siwajalingam in a hurry left to Jaffna by air plane without completing the medical care. At this time journalist Ravi Prasad Herat had gone to kandy to organize some money for M.K.Sivajalingams hospital charges.

This was seen as a disaster by many in the LTTE, including Prabhakaran, who posthumously promoted him to the rank of "brigadier". The LTTE also announced a three-day mourning. Former LTTE cadres swear even today that the Eelam War IV, which ended in the Tigers' military destruction, may have possibly taken a different course had Balraj not died.

Bigger blows came as 2009 dawned. Government soldiers first overran Paranthan, forcing the Tigers to hastily abandon their positions in the Jaffna peninsula, and then captured nearby Kilinochchi, which had served as the capital of the LTTE-administered region in Sri Lanka's north for around a decade. It was in Kilinochchi where the LTTE leadership met international visitors, including Norwegian diplomats. It was in Kilinochchi that Prabhakaran held his last press conference for the Sri Lankan and international media in April 2002, where he was described by an aide as the "president and prime minister of Tamil Eelam".

The loss of Kilinochchi, which housed the LTTE-run Bank of Tamil Eelam and had all the trappings of a de facto independent state, was a severe blow to the Tigers' rapidly depleting morale. Mullaitivu, where the Tigers had been entrenched for long, was the next to fall. By late March 2009, the area held by the LTTE had dangerously shrunk. When the Tigers suffered a shocking and blood-soaked punishment at the start of April in a vicious battle at Anandapuram, losing scores of battle-hardened commanders, it became more than clear that the days of LTTE bravado were over.

A humiliating development took place on 22 April when the LTTE's high-profile media coordinator, Velayutham Dayanidhi alias Daya Master, and a man who translated Prabhakaran's Tamil into English for visitors, Kumar Pancharathnam alias George, surrendered to the advancing Sri Lankan Army. They were the most senior, LTTE leaders ever to give up in a battlefield. The surrender made many despondent Tamils ask themselves why the rebel group forced so many youngsters to die over the decades when its own front-ranking leaders, even if they were not from the military wing, were so eager to live.

FEAR CREEPS IN

The chain of debacles never stopped a sharp reversal from earlier occasions when LTTE fighters used to smash through one fortified camp after another of the Sri Lankan Army. By now, the hundreds and possibly thousands of deaths, both of combatants on both sides as well as Tamil civilians, was finding an echo around the world. In the capitals of several Western countries that were home to a numerically strong Tamil diaspora, hundreds of emotive men and women took to the streets demanding an immediate ceasefire. The LTTE encouraged the demonstrations because it was literally gasping for breath. Pro-LTTE politicians in Tamil Nadu put pressure on the Indian government to somehow persuade Colombo to halt the military offensive.

Sri Lanka's defence secretary, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a former soldier and a younger brother of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, was directing the merciless war against the LTTE. He came

under immense pressure from the United States to end the military blitzkrieg without delay. Gotabaya, who also held American citizenship, made no commitment to US interlocutors but shared his concern with his military commanders on the ground on 14 May. He wondered how long the war would drag on and insisted that it needed to be hastened to a victorious conclusion before the American pressure became unbearable. Army Chief General Sarath Fonseka, who was then on a critical visit to China, also telephoned his field commanders from Beijing the next day, more or less echoing his boss Gotabaya.

But despite the covert American pressure, along with 11th-hour Western moves to somehow end the conflict and offer an amnesty to the LTTE leadership (more about it later), the UN Security Council for the first time strongly denounced the Tigers "for acts of terrorism for many years" and for the continued use of civilians as human shields. In what would have jolted the LTTE brass and its supporters worldwide, the Security Council asked the outfit to lay down its weapons.

On 16 May, the Sri Lankan military broke through the last of the major LTTE defences, giving the confidence to President Mahinda Rajapaksa to declare a premature military victory over the LTTE in Jordan at the G-11 Summit.

As if on cue, on 17 May, the day Prabhakaran spoke his heart out to his close commanders, the LTTE's chief of international relations, Selvarasa Pathmanathan alias Kumaran Pathmanathan, popularly known as KP, made a declaration that jolted the Tamil community. "This battle has reached its bitter end," he said in a terse message which emanated from Kuala Lumpur where he was holed up and where he would be dramatically arrested within months. "We have decided to silence our guns. Our only regrets are for the lives lost and that we could not hold out for longer."

Both Mahinda and KP may have spoken too soon. The LTTE, including the indomitable Prabhakaran, continued to fight it out in a tiny and rugged corner of northwestern Sri Lanka.

Even before Prabhakaran's 17 May desperation became known, some of the very young guerrillas-many in their mid-teens and others a few years older-had

started to dump their weapons as well as battle fatigues that were now stained with mud and blood. The war was raging so fiercely that the fighters had stopped bathing. Many got into civilian attire they hastily borrowed from those who had something to spare. The aim was to flee the battlefield where people were dying in large numbers day after day.

Many of these deserters were youngsters, both boys and girls, forcibly recruited over the years into the LTTE to swell its numbers. Food was also in severely short supply. There was widespread hunger, forcing many civilians to dig out edible roots and consume them, raw or after minimal cooking. The LTTE occasionally distributed food to some of the trapped civilians but the amount it gave away was measly compared to the demand.

Said another former LTTE guerrilla who still lives in Sri Lanka, "I saw some ITTE boys throw away their weapons and uniforms and try to escape. Some succeeded. They all seemed to know that the end was near and that they would all be wiped out. Agony was writ large on their faces. I saw some Tigers take cyanide and die. Some Black Tigers blasted themselves to death. They did not want to be taken captive by the Sri Lankan forces at any cost."

It was not just the lower-rung LTTE cadres who were in visible fright. The families of some Tiger leaders were equally in consternation. "We decided to leave the place on 12 May... (The) LTTE's defeat was clearly evident then," recalled Satyadevi years later. She was the wife of Thillaiyampalam Sivanesan alias Colonel Soosai, who headed LTTE's powerful naval wing, which for years had given the jitters to the Sri Lankan navy. She admitted that it was her husband who provided her a boat." Others in the LTTE leadership, but not a part of the fighting force, were also desperately telephoning anyone they could get diplomats, Norwegian interlocutors, Tamil Members of Parliament (MPs), Indians, even journalists to help them to work out some way they could surrender. It was sheer panic bordering on total helplessness.

However, a large section of the surviving LTTE fighters, who had been engaged in war for long years, refused to give up. Despite the tremendous odds stacked against them, they kept fighting the military and remained loyal to Prabhakaran. The army repeatedly began calling over loudhailers, urging the Tigers to surrender. It did not turn out to be a futile exercise. Thousands of fighters of all ages gave themselves up during the end-stages of the conflict. The military even put up boards in Tamil in the war zone to facilitate the surrenders both for senior leaders and for others of the LTTE. But not everyone in the leadership levels who surrendered managed to stay alive.

A BATTERED LTTE

One Sri Lankan soldier at the frontline who had surmised the desperation in the LTTE, but was equally worried by the doggedness of the Tigers, was Major General Kamal Gunaratne, who was heading the army's 53 Division. He had been a part of the war against the LTTE from its infancy in the early 1980s and was one of the most battle-tested men in the island nation. His men, along with the 58 Division, were the ones who were delivering most of the final lethal blows to the once formidable Tamil Tigers.

By the night of 17 May, the last of the Tigers had been cornered in an area close to the coast, measuring 400 metres by 400 metres. This is all that remained of the one-third of Sri Lanka's land territory that at one time was under the firm control of the LTTE. For an insurgent group that was rated as one of the world's deadliest, this was a shocking collapse. The 58 Division was massed on two sides of the shrunken territory while Gunaratne's 53 Division was inching ahead from another side. On the fourth side lay the Nandikadal lagoon and the Sri Lankan navy in the Indian Ocean. Little did anyone anticipate that this lagoon and its mangrove forests would end up being Prabhakaran's final resting place.

Some of the worst and the last of the fighting took place from 16 to 18 May. There had been one pre-dawn daring attack by the LTTE on the military but it was beaten back. Taking part in the onslaught was a flotilla of speedboats driven like maniacs by the Sea Tigers. Six of the boats were commandeered by suicide bombers, who came speeding towards the coast at such a fast pace that the vessels flew into

the air and landed on military lines, killing several soldiers. However, the attack, which if successful could have enabled Prabhakaran to escape from where he was, ended in a horrible failure. And with that evaporated whatever chances Prabhakaran may have had to get to a more secure area and fight another day. There was no question of escaping by air because the LITE's nascent air wing had already met its demise.

That day, 17 May, indeed proved unlucky for the LTTE. It lost more than 150 guerrillas, including some key and tested commanders. The LTTE's naval chief, Colonel Soosai, known as the "admiral" of the Sea Tigers, contacted a journalist over satellite phone, his voice surprisingly betraying none of the desperation that many others seemed to be in. "We are fighting on," he said, but admitted that they only had a two-square-kilometre area under their control. After saying that thousands of civilians had been killed, he asked the journalist to hurriedly get in touch with two pro-LTTE political leaders in Tamil Nadu. 13 The next day, Soosai spoke over the Tigers' Radio and made a desperate appeal to the Tamil expatriates in the West not to halt the street protests seeking an immediate end to the war. "We don't know if we will be alive tomorrow or not," he said in an ominously prophetic comment.

The last time that SK, a member of the LTTE intelligence, saw Prabhakaran alive was early on the morning of 17 May. It was at around 6 a.m. that SK, who for decades was trusted by Shanmugalingam Sivashankar alias Pottu Amman, the LTTE intelligence chief, reached where Prabhakaran was. SK had a pressing concern: he was famished.

"We had run out of food and I was starving," SK told me years later in Colombo. "Believe it or not, Prabhakaran seemed as normal as ever even though he would have had the painful realisation that his Tamil Eelam dream was about to meet a terrible and inglorious end and the LTTE's destruction was around the corner. I don't know how he managed it but he did not look ruffled."

The next day, a desperate LTTE unleashed another carefully planned attack on the troops. This time, the guerrillas broke through one of the military's forward lines. The soldiers, their morale very high, quickly regrouped, closed the breach within 30 minutes and hit back viciously, leaving many more LTTE guerrillas dead. LTTE fighters who had been captured or surrendered identified most of the senior commanders who lay dead. The fatalities included Sivanandan Somasekaran alias Brigadier Bhanu, Velayuthapillai Baheerathakumar alias Brigadier Theepan, Lieutenant Colonel Lawrence and Ratnam Master-until then highly regarded fighters among the Tigers. Also killed, separately, was Charles Antony, Prabhakaran's elder son who was 24 years old, and his 10 bodyguards armed with state-of-the-art weapons. When the soldiers searched the son's and his bodyguards' uniforms, they found a whopping 2.3 million Sri Lankan rupees on them.

"Every inch of our motherland has been taken back," Gunaratne gloated on the telephone to Army Chief Fonseka. The latter was happy to hear the news but he had one haunting question, "Where is Prabhakaran?"

Gunaratne admitted that barring three men-Prabhakaran, Pottu Amman and Soosai everyone in the highest echelons of the insurgent group had been accounted for. Fonseka made it clear that if there was no trace of Prabhakaran, then the war was not over. The general was more than right. All said and done, Prabhakaran was the symbol of Tamil resistance and the face and soul of the LTTE. As long as he was not located, even if the rest of the LTTE was decimated, it would still be said that the Tigers had not been fully overpowered. Prabhakaran mattered the most. It was an unfortunate but bitter reality.

WHERE IS PRABHAKARAN?

Gunaratne did wonder where the insurgent leader could be. There had been no report of anyone sighting Prabhakaran for some days. Had he escaped? There was some talk that he had found his way to Myanmar. 15 Despite many of its successes vis-à-vis the LTTE, the Sri Lankan intelligence was perennially in the dark regarding Prabhakaran's precise whereabouts although he had been an outlaw for decades. Was he perhaps already dead?

Indeed, a few days earlier some of his juniors had shown him the body of a uniformed LTTE guerrilla who they insisted was none other than Prabhakaran. The dead man did resemble the LTTE boss, but Gunaratne had his serious doubts. LTTE prisoners soon clarified that the lifeless man was Madhavan Master," who somewhat resembled Prabhakaran. Gunaratne was certain that Prabhakaran must be alive because he would have surely come to know if he had died. Yes, Prabhakaran had to be accounted for. But where the hell was the man?

It was a question that the Sri Lankan military, and earlier, the Indian Army, had repeatedly asked as Prabhakaran led what seemed to be a war that showed no signs of ever ending. But now that the LTTE was on its last legs, the question had, assumed unprecedented importance. By then, however, Sri Lanka was in a state of jubilation. Rumours swirled in the island nation that Prabhakaran was already dead. It was said that the LTTE chief had tried to escape in an ambulance from the battle zone and got killed along with two senior commanders. Another story had it that Prabhakaran tried to escape in a hijacked Sri Lankan bus but was cut down. Gunaratne was aghast about the origins of the rumours because he was still hunting for the insurgent who had caused so much bloodshed and for so long in the once tranquil island nation.

As the Sri Lankan military advanced steadily, it was not just the LTTE fighters who were getting cornered. Also trapped along with the rebels were tens of thousands of Tamil civilians—men, women and children. 18 Many had been moving from one place to another all across northern Sri Lanka over the months as the Tigers withdrew steadily to Mullaitivu. Most did not even belong to Mullaitivu district where they were caught up amid the final bitter fighting. They hailed from other districts. For months, in some cases, for years, these distraught civilians remained with the LTTE, partly out of a sense of loyalty to the guerrillas and partly due to fear of the military. By March-April 2009, they were fatigued, hungry and angry. All that remained in the LTTE zone were the dead and maimed, a foul stench, civilians crying for food, water and medicines, and burning vehicles everywhere. It was evident that the curtains were about to set on the long-drawn-out conflict.

The military estimated that there were about 300,000 Tamil civilians in the badly depleted LTTE territory in March. The LTTE had created a bund all around the area, partly to fight the troops and partly to prevent the civilians from escaping. But once the troops managed to dent these bunds, an exodus began a frightened mass escape from the open air LTTE prison towards the military zone. The ordinary Tamil civilians, famished and frightened, wanted to be no more part of the horrific bloodshed. Within days, thousands of men and women, some carrying children in their arms, began to stream towards the government soldiers. Some civilians also escaped by sea in overcrowded boats, desperate to go to anywhere away from the fighting. It was this mass escape that dramatically brought down the number of Tamil civilians in the battle zone by the time the LTTE became history.

Early on the morning of 19 May, Gunaratne was still ruminating over where Prabhakaran could be when he was told by a junior officer that an intense firefight had broken out in the muddy and brackish waters of the mangroves at the Nandikadal lagoon. A significant number of LTTE fighters seemed holed up there. None of them was ready to surrender.

PRABHAKARAN DIES

When the fighting finally died out after about an hour, Gunaratne heard what he thought, just for a fleeting moment, was too good to be true.

"Sir, we killed Prabhakaran in the last attack!" exclaimed Colonel Ravipriya.

"Are you sure it is Prabhakaran?" asked an incredulous Gunaratne.

Ravipriya was confident. "As sure as the sun and the moon, Sir!" Sitting in his plush and spacious office in the newly built defence ministry headquarters in Colombo, Gunaratne recalled to me the defining moment when he became the first senior-most army officer to know that Prabhakaran, a sworn enemy of Sri Lanka, was finally dead.

However, the major general wanted to be absolutely sure. He ordered an officer, Lieutenant Colonel Lalantha Gamage, to rush to the spot and confirm that Prabhakaran was indeed dead. Within minutes, Gamage was on the military telephone, virtually screaming, "Sir, Eureka! Sir, it's correct. It is Prabhakaran!"

"Are you sure?" Gunaratne asked. When the junior stood his ground, Gunaratne repeated, "Are you very sure?"

"Yes, Sir, yes, Sir! I am very sure!" Gamage exclaimed with excitement.

Gunaratne, his heart beating rapidly, was not ready to take even the remotest chance of being in the wrong. The development, if true, was far too significant to slip up. For one last time, he asked, "Are you very, very sure?"

It is only when Gamage said he was more than 100 per cent sure that Prabhakaran was dead that Gunaratne decided to break the path-breaking development to the army chief. Before that, he ordered his officers to quickly bring Prabhakaran's body to him. By then, some 3,000 soldiers had rushed to the mangrove where the LTTE chief's body lay. Some soldiers jumped into the shallow, dirty waters and dragged out the body, shouting and screaming in wild glee. Once they saw a dead Prabhakaran, most soldiers, in sheer excitement, began firing away in the air in frenzied triumph, triggering a massive display of shooting stars in the morning sky.

One officer tried to discipline the soldiers, but without much success. When Gunaratne was told what was happening, he told the officer to let the exhausted troops vent their feelings. Many of these soldiers, from the Sinhalese rural south, had been fighting the LTTE for years, not sure if they would ever be able to get the better of the Tigers. The unthinkable had finally happened.

As he began walking towards the spot, Gunaratne saw a virtual army of troops in green fatigues surrounding a small group of soldiers carrying Prabhakaran's body on a stretcher. The soldiers were screaming on top of their voice in Sinhalese. "This is Prabhakaran! This is Prabhakaran! We killed Prabhakaran! We killed Prabhakaran!"

It was nothing short of a carnival. Gunaratne had seen nothing like this in his entire military career. Many soldiers were clicking away photos of the dead Prabhakaran on their mobile

phones, capturing a moment that would ignite contrasting emotions in and far beyond Sri Lanka.

Fonseka was in the Sri Lankan parliament when he got the news. By then, President Mahinda, knowing the end was near, had already given a victory speech to cheering MPs. The moment Fonseka came on the line, Gunaratne blurted out in Sinhalese, "Maha eka ivarai!" (The big man is finished!).

Fonseka, like Gunaratne earlier, for a fleeting second could not believe what he heard. "What?" he asked, displaying the same emotion that Gunaratne had shown a short while ago.

Gunaratne put it in English. "Sir, Prabhakaran is dead!"

Fonseka: "What?"

Gunaratne: "Sir, we have killed Prabhakaran!"

Fonseka was silent for a few seconds before asking: "What did you say?"

When Gunaratne repeated himself, a disbelieving Fonseka asked: "Sure?"

"Very sure, Sir!"

"Very sure?" Fonseka was also trying to be absolutely foolproof that the man who had been elusive for decades while tormenting them no end was really dead.

Fonseka wanted to know how Gunaratne was so confident. Gunaratne's reply stunned him, "The man is lying dead at my feet!"

Fourteen long years later, Gunaratne told me in his office, "When his body was placed before me, I said to myself. The man who killed tens of thousands of people and who brought so much discredit to Sri Lanka is now lying dead near my feet, like a dog."

THE HUMILIATION

When Prabhakaran's body was brought before Gunaratne, the wounds were still fresh. Prabhakaran, killed apparently only half an hour earlier, around 9.45 a.m., was bleeding from the ears. His forehead had suffered a major slashing injury, almost splitting the skull. His mouth was open and his eyes were looking up, betraying a terrorised look, as if he had been stunned by whatever felled him. There were no bullet wounds. Indeed, apart from the grievous head wound, there was not even a scratch on the body. This was truly remarkable for someone who had been underground for decades. A grey stubble covered his face; evidently, he had not shaved for some days. And the body was hot when Gunaratne touched it.

Prabhakaran was dressed in military fatigues. A quick search of his pockets revealed his LTTE identity card as well as the group's metallic dog tag. There were also some medicines, probably from India, meant for his diabetes. The ugly bloody injury in the skull was gently covered up with a blue cloth.

When the soldiers began to remove the bodies of other LTTE fighters floating in the mangrove, they counted a total of 56 men. One of them was Soosai. All of them had been with Prabhakaran till the very end, and all of them had met the same terrible end, fighting to the last man.

Army Chief Fonseka insisted that Prabhakaran's uniform must be taken off. He decreed that no one except Sri Lankan soldiers could be in battle fatigues. Accordingly, Prabhakaran the body held by some soldiers was stripped off his uniform, leaving him in just his underpants. The army quickly placed concertina wire around the body to ensure that no one trampled it, even by mistake.

Fonseka told Gunaratne that he would send two former LTTE leaders, Vinayagamurthy Muralitharan alias Colonel Karuna, a long-time Prabhakaran loyalist whose decision to break from the LTTE in 2004 had severely weakened the Tigers, and Daya Master, a former rebel spokesperson who had surrendered to the military only a month earlier, to identify for sure that the man said to be Prabhakaran was indeed the Tamil Tigers' chief. Gunaratne felt this was not necessary because the casualty was truly Prabhakaran, but he was overruled.

The two ex-Tigers, flown from Colombo in a military aircraft, hardly took any time to acknowledge that the man lying lifeless was none other than the feared Prabhakaran, their former boss who had presided over one of the longest running insurgencies in the world. Daya Master was overcome with emotion-his eyes became moist. Karuna, in contrast, was beaming and shook hands warmly with senior army officers. Karuna had been hounded by the LTTE after his revolt and it was a miracle he had survived. Now, Prabhakaran, who had tried to have Karuna killed, had met a gory and horrible end.

What could have passed through Prabhakaran's mind during his final moments? It is perfectly possible that all he had gone through from the early 1970s when he fled his home for good flashed past; how he plunged into militancy; how he never got caught; how he built up the LTTE brick by brick, turning a group that initially had no more than 25 to 30 young men into one of the world's deadliest militant-cum-terrorist outfits; how he forced the Indian Army to quit Sri Lanka; how he tormented Sri Lanka for decades; how he gained control of a third of Sri Lanka's territory and two-thirds of its winding coast; and how, finally, the dream of carving out an independent Tamil State came crashing in a blood-soaked corner of the island nation.

One thing is, however, undisputed. For the good or the bad, Prabhakaran, who was 54 years old when he died, fought until he could fight no more. And he fell fighting. He did not surrender-unlike those among the Tigers who gave themselves up at varying points of time and live today. Even Sri Lankan military officers, while detesting and loathing the man they killed, admit that Prabhakaran fought till his last breath, even when it was more than apparent that he was waging a losing battle.

"It must be stated the last group (in the LTTE) fought till the last bullet and the last terrorist, without giving up," Gunaratne would later write about the men who died with Prabhakaran. "Though they were our enemy, they were true fighters."

EARLY DAYS OF THE VALVETTITHURAI VETARAN

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"I am also someone with normal emotions... I am only human... I am a normal man," Prabhakaran told a pro-LTTE YouTube channel. The interview was given at a time when his writ ran large over much of Sri Lanka's sprawling north and east. The statement was only partly true.

The 22-year-old who would set up a guerrilla group in the 1970s and threaten to break up Sri Lanka was certainly not another "normal man" although he did come from an ordinary middle-class Tamil family with its roots in the small northern coastal town of Valvettithurai, widely known as VVT.

The first Tamil-Sinhalese riots rocked Sri Lanka in 1956, leaving an estimated 150 people, mainly Tamils, dead, barely two years after Prabhakaran was born. 26 The second ethnic riots in 1958 were bloodier and killed hundreds, the victims again dominantly Tamils. More than 20,000 Tamils also fled their homes after mobs went on the rampage in Colombo.

It was during the 1958 conflagration that a Hindu priest at Panadura town, some 30 kilometres from Colombo, was doused with kerosene by a Sinhalese crowd when he was asleep on a cot. He burnt to death. Prabhakaran heard the story several times while growing up. The killing, although he did not witness it, dismayed him immensely. "Ours was a God-fearing society and people were religious-minded. The widespread feeling was when a priest like him was burnt alive, why did we not have the capability to hit back?" Prabhakaran would ask years later.

Another incident, although it did not cause any death, also left a scar on the young Prabhakaran's psyche. One day, a group of young men were playing cards in VVT when some military personnel, all Sinhalese, reached the spot and told the Tamils to scoot. The Tamils did not approve of this high-handedness. As far as they were concerned, they were creating no public nuisance and bothering no one. When a spat erupted, the Tamil men set upon the startled soldiers, snatched their weapons and melted away.

Stunned by the aggression, the troops approached the chairman of the local council and complained.

Situation, went around VVT telling everyone that it was illegal to take away weapons belonging to the military. He demanded that the arms and ammunition be returned. Fortunately, his order was heeded and the weapons were restored to the authorities.

If VVT's residents thought this was the end of the matter, they were wrong. The overwhelmingly Sinhalese military and the Tamil-dominated police, whose personnel were then loyal to Colombo, had other ideas. Even as the weapons were being given back, another group of soldiers reached the area stealthily. Once the recovery was done, they went on a violent spree, attacking people indiscriminately and setting fire to homes at random. By the time the orgy ended, no one was killed, but naked terror had been let loose to teach VVT's

Tamils a lasting lesson. One boy who witnessed the one-sided aggression was none other than Prabhakaran.

On another occasion, Prabhakaran, accompanied by several youths from VVT, went to Jaffna to witness a political event. Although it was held on a peaceful note, the police came hard on the organisers and participants, scattering them helter-skelter. Prabhakaran did not suffer any physical injury but was shaken up. Why did the police, he asked friends, behave so brutally against Tamils all the time?

Sri Lankan police and military excesses in his hometown and elsewhere played the foundational role in sowing a strong sense of hatred towards the Sinhalese and the Sinhalese-dominated governments in Colombo among Tamils. Prabhakaran was probably seven years old when he saw the first body of a Tamil man shot dead in the sea by the navy. It sent a chill down his spine. The victim was Indira Lingam, also a distant relative. Lingam had gone to the sea to fish; by the time his drifting vessel was discovered by others and brought ashore in VVT, the man lay dead in the boat. A huge crowd gathered in sullen silence. It was the first time Prabhakaran saw the victim of a cold-blooded killing linked to ethnic factors from close quarters.

It did not help matters that VVT, where Prabhakaran spent much of his younger days, had a reputation of its own. VVT's menfolk were known to be masters of the sea that divided northern Sri Lanka from southern India. Boats from VVT frequently crisscrossed the waters, with human cargo and other contraband. When new Tamil movies released in Madras, as Tamil Nadu was then known, movie buffs from VVT would simply sail to the Indian state to watch the latest films and return home the same day. The narrow strip of sea could be crossed in about an hour in a motorised boat.

Smuggling in both household and electronic goods was widespread. Both legitimate and illegitimate businesses generated a lot of money, which made many in the coastal town rich. A sizeable number of Tamils from VVT also contributed generously to Tamil politics and refused to accept the Sinhalese majoritarian ideology. Prabhakaran grew up in such an atmosphere.

MILITANCY IN INFANCY

Like Prabhakaran, many young Tamils across the Tamil-majority areas in Sri Lanka's northeast were also incensed due to persisting ethnic tensions. The feeling slowly grew among Tamils that the Sinhalese would never treat them as equals. Thanks to government high-handedness, the cleavage between the two communities deepened over time though a large number of Sinhalese lived in Jaffna, the Tamil heartland, and the two groups got along very well locally. By the dawn of the 1970s, globally a turbulent decade, the first pangs of Tamil militancy began to take roots in Jaffna, haltingly spreading to other parts of the northeastern region.

Unlike the established and senior Tamil politicians, younger men like Prabhakaran concluded that peaceful and democratic struggles held no meaning in Sri Lanka as the Sinhalese majority would never show respect for any peaceful dissent. In the long run, it was the conduct of the Sri Lankan State which shaped Prabhakaran to become what he ultimately metamorphosed into an uncompromising Tamil who would never agree to shake hands with the Sinhalese and who came to firmly embrace the idea that the only salvation for Tamils lay in seceding from Sri Lanka.

Prabhakaran, rated an "average" student by teachers, never finished schooling. Still a teenager, he drifted, like many of his contemporaries, to the militantly nationalist Tamil Students League and the Tamil Youth League. But unlike most members of these two groups, Prabhakaran was not satisfied merely with shouting anti-government slogans or scrawling graffiti on the walls. He desired "action"-a euphemism among the hot-headed for violence.

As he plunged into the infancy of militancy, Prabhakaran began to keep away from home, initially for days and then for longer periods. In 1972, a crude bomb exploded while being manufactured under a palmyra tree in Jaffna injuring four men, Prabhakaran included. The burn injuries in his legs earned him the sobriquet of "karikalan" (man with black legs).

It was also in the early 1970s that the police came to his house in VVT one night looking for him. The moment he heard the furtive knocks on the door, Prabhakaran sensed danger-a trait which never deserted him all through his life and bolted from the back door. He never returned home. From then on, he was a man on the run until, slowly and steadily, he became the de facto lord and master of whatever he surveyed in Sri Lanka's northeastern region.

To those who knew and interacted with him, the young Prabhakaran came across as a passionate Tamil who had no faith in moderate politics. Sinhalese obduracy in refusing to shake hands with the moderate Tamil leadership that had a flair for Gandhian tactics and to impose its ways on the Tamils only strengthened the conviction of young Tamils that violence was the only way out. The result was a slow but steady rise in looting of banks and attacks on members of the security forces as well as Tamils dubbed "traitors" for siding with the government. This often led to tragic outcomes.

Prabhakaran did not hesitate to rob banks to net much needed cash so vital for young men who led an underground life. Nor did he have any inhibition to kill if the situation demanded this. On 5 June 1974, when a young Tamil activist, Ponnurdurai Sivakumaran, swallowed a cyanide pill to escape arrest during an attempted bank robbery in Jaffna, Prabhakaran was among a large number of Tamils who were moved by his death. Sivakumaran's passing away had a deep impact on Prabhakaran and guided him to inject a unique cyanide culture in the LTTE ranks with devastating results.

THE LTTE GROWS

The early killings in and around Jaffna were not solely committed by Prabhakaran and his small band of associates but it is certain that he and his mates were involved in many of them. The Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), the first Tamil militant group to be born, and the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOT), which came up following a destabilising split in the LTTE, also shot dead security personnel.

The first most high-profile victim of Prabhakaran's self-taught shooting skills was the mayor of Jaffna, Alfred Duraiappah. Prabhakaran had tried to kill him earlier too but failed. Finally, he was shot dead on 27 July 1975 while visiting a Hindu temple. Duraiappah was a popular politician but he ignited Prabhakaran's anger for being a passionate government supporter despite his Tamil ethnicity. In Prabhakaran's reckoning, no Tamil must support the Sinhalese-dominated government. He unequivocally held this view until his own end.

Once he assassinated Duraiappah, Prabhakaran earned a halo in the militant ranks that grew and expanded over the years. The police arrested some of those involved in the crime but there

was no trace of Prabhakaran, who had by then destroyed all his photographs at home. This helped Prabhakaran to move around Jaffna despite a security crackdown although he did his best to avoid being seen by policemen.

Prabhakaran was present at Vaddukodai in Jaffna in 1976 when the Tamil United Front transformed itself into the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and vowed to fight for a sovereign State of Tamil Eelam. Since Prabhakaran's identity was unknown to the police, it helped him and Uma Maheswaran to travel to Colombo in January 1978 and shoot a Tamil MP who had won the election a year earlier on a TULF ticket but switched over to the ruling Sinhalese-dominated United National Party (UNP). The "Wanted" posters released by the police after the shooting carried four names but not Prabhakaran's. It was later that year that the police came out with a list of Tamil men "Wanted" for various incidents where Prabhakaran's name figured at the very top.

By then, the LTTE had gone public for the first time, claiming responsibility for 11 murders in all, including that of Duraiappah. It was the first time the world discovered the existence of a group called the LTTE that was until then talked about only in whispers. The LTTE insignia of a roaring tiger surrounded by a ring of 33 bullets and two rifles became public knowledge.

Prabhakaran had also developed the habit along with other Tamils in the militant ranks of escaping to Tamil Nadu by boat every time the security forces stepped up the heat in Jaffna. The sea crossing was not without risk but it was a no major challenge for the professional otis or boatmen who were also into smuggling. Life in Tamil Nadu in those times were, however, tough for the militants-unlike after the 1983 anti-Tamil violence when the situation radically changed. There were days when Prabhakaran and others, devoid of Indian well-wishers, went to bed hungry. Naturally, they eagerly looked forward to prasadam given away at local temples. There were times when they survived on cheap curd rice or simply bought and consumed sleep-inducing tablets in a desperate bid to overcome hunger. Such hardships would evaporate in a few years.

Prabhakaran teamed up with a man called Chetti from Jaffna in Tamil Nadu and went on to rob banks in partnership with him on their return to Jaffna. Friends warned Prabhakaran about Chetti's criminal past but he was not swayed. However, a day came when the young guerrilla realised he had been cheated of money by Chetti, who was soon killed.

JUSTIFYING KILLINGS

Once Prabhakaran and his companions plunged into the killing game, there was no stopping it. Violence, as they say, begets violence and more violence. The earliest victims were known criminals who were at times found dead with a single bullet wound and a notice strung nearby revealing their identity and members of the security forces, most of them constables, the eyes and ears of the administration. Tamils alleged to be "traitors" a label that would over the decades consume innumerable Tamils were also executed, either because they were from rival groups or had displayed the audacity to quit the militant ranks. The number of Tamils killed by the LTTE on various excuses, until it itself was militarily crushed, would run into hundreds by any conservative estimate.

In the nascent days of the Tamil struggle, the LTTE also killed two communist leaders in Jaffna, which was home to a modest left-wing movement. Others known to be vocal about Marxism and the class struggle were warned to either keep away from Jaffna or to stop practising politics

altogether. As far as the LTTE was concerned any ideology which divides a society on the basis of classes worked against a cohesive and united Tamil identity. It did not matter that early LTTE literature itself had dash of socialism. The increasing fear of the LTTE and its lack of inhibition to kill worked wonders. The communists simply melted away from the Tamil heartland "Only we can speak for the Tamils," LTTE activists made it clear to the leftists.

Sivasanmugamurthy, a virtual right hand of Uma Maheshwaran, who broke away from the LTTE and formed a rival group, angering Prabhakaran. Sivasanmugamurthy He was shot dead at the Chitra Press in Jaffna where he published a left-leaning just journal, Puthiya Pathai (New Path). The LTTE also killed two men for quitting the with LTTE. Later, the PLOT shot and killed two young men said to be LTTE backers.

The double murder happened after Prabhakaran and Uma Maheshwaran were arrested in India following a dramatic shootout on a Chennai street. It was the first and the last time the LTTE chief fell into a police dragnet. But unlike in 1973 Dravida Munnethra Kashagam (DMK) government in Tamil Nadu extradited Selvarajah Yogachandran alias Kuttimani, a Tamil militant wanted in Sri Lanka.

Tamil parties organised street protests demanding that Prabhakaran and three other Tamils should not be sent back to Colombo. A Chennai court ordered a "house arrest" for Prabhakaran; he was interned in Madurai town at the house of a prominent politician, P. Nedumaran, who over the years would emerge as one of the most vocal apologists in India of the LTTE and its leader. After seven long months in Madurai, Prabhakaran escaped to Sri Lanka, after taking permission from an obliging Nedumaran.

The first of internal killings committed or ordered by Prabhakaran were not taken seriously by the Tamil society. These murders were the first sign of a streak of fascism in Prabhakaran that would later play havoc with the Tamil community. According to Tamil sources, Prabhakaran would argue feverishly that the ancient Tamil kingdoms collapsed as their emperors were constantly feuding with one another instead of coming under one single flag. This is why, he argued with friends and associates, there should be only one group to fight for Tamil rights. He obviously had the LITE in mind.

When Tamils in large numbers voted for the Federal Party and later the TULE they wanted parliamentary politics to flourish, a type of politics they believed would eventually lead to stability and peace. It was wrongly assumed by many in those troubled times that the vote for the belligerently noisy Tamil parties was a mandate for violence and militancy. It is this flawed understanding by younger Tamils-abetted partly by a section of established Tamil politicians that led to circumstances and events which soon galloped out of control with grisly repercussions.

To close friends, Prabhakaran justified the murders he committed with a bizarre theory that his victims' souls remained alive while only their bodies perished. This was straight out of the Bhagavad Gita, one of Hinduism's most revered holy books. Such thinking probably helped him overcome whatever initial inhibitions he may have nursed following the first few killings. But Prabhakaran's was a corrupted adunderstanding of the immortal lessons Lord Krishna imparted to warrior Arjuna in kill the battlefield of the Mahabharata.

Once while returning to a hideout after shooting dead a policeman in Jaffna, Prabhakaran and an associate heard a Tamil song blare from a radio in a roadside & shop. It was centred on the

Krishna-Arjuna dialogue that killings are justified if done for the larger good. "Prabhakaran was very happy to hear that song at that moment. He felt very strongly that it was a divine signal that the killing he had committed just then was perfectly justified," recalled his former associate Raghavan who was with him.

It is perhaps this confused worldview that made Prabhakaran believe strongly in the politics of gore and treating people at large as an expendable commodity in the wider larger scheme of things. When a young Jaffna academic in the early 1980s insisted first that it was important to politicise people before taking up the gun, Prabhakaran was furious. "What people, you talk about?" he exploded. "We have to do some actions (read killings) first. People will then follow us."

He carried this faith until the very end of his life. Towards the late 1990s, when V. Balakumar, who had by then merged his Tamil militant group, the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS) with the LTTE, aired some grudges that ordinary Tamil people had, Prabhakaran got angry. "You are fit to be a postmaster to receive complaints," he blurted out, addressing a stunned Balakumar. "If you agree to accept complaints, that is all you will get." In short, Prabhakaran wanted the soft-spoken Balakumar, one of the few from rival Tamil groups whom he respected, to forget people's complaints and misgivings and get on with the job of fighting for Tamil Eelam.

DISDAIN FOR THE MASSES

Like most men with a dictatorial mindset, Prabhakaran had a certain disdain for the people he claimed to represent. If associates told him that people were unhappy about something the LTTE had done, he would respond without batting an eyelid, "We can never satisfy people. Whatever we do, they will be never happy. The problem with people is that they don't want to suffer but they want to be liberated from the Sinhalese yoke. If they want liberation, they must be ready to suffer." Prabhakaran also convinced himself that terrorist methods were justified, and told a stunned colleague as early as 1978 that killing Sinhalese children was not wrong because they would grow up and kill Tamils anyway.

This was the man who masterminded the slaughter of 13 Sri Lankan soldiers near Jaffna University on the night of 23 July 1983, triggering a political earthquake of unprecedented proportions in the still largely serene island nation. It was the first time so many soldiers had been killed at one go. It marked a high point in Tamil militancy that had only stung the country until then. The meticulously executed attack made everyone sit up.

Even Prabhakaran would not have visualised that the massacre would end up igniting the worst anti-Tamil orgy in Sri Lanka, unleashed by government-backed Sinhalese thugs, leaving hundreds of innocent Tamils dead, many thousands homeless and the entire community in a state of utter despair. Thousands of Tamils, suddenly fearing a bleak future in Sri Lanka, began escaping to India by the sea; many who had the means made it to the West, sowing the seeds of what would eventually emerge as one of the best-knit Third World diaspora groups.

The anti-Tamil mayhem forced thousands of young Tamils to think of extracting revenge. Tamil militant groups which until then were desperate to sign up members now had hundreds knocking on their doors for admission. The LTTE ambush and its aftermath ended up sucking

neighbouring India into what was until then an internal conflict in Sri Lanka, which the world at large almost knew nothing about Prabhakaran had, with a small band of fellow fighters, catapulted a largely unknown Tamil militancy on to the global stage.

Slowly and steadily, the LTTE would become an internationally known acronym developments they had not bargained for. The situation demanded mature calm thinking. This is when Balasingham, who had relocated to India after leveraging his political and diplomatic expertise to advance the LTTE's interests. On more than one occasion, Balasingham persuaded Prabhakaran to act in a manner he would not have wanted for the guerrilla's own betterment. After the 1983 violence, when it became known that India was going to train and arm Tamil militant groups, the home-grown Prabhakaran's first reaction was to remain out of the Indian orbit. One reason was that Prabhakaran feared that he would be taken into custody if he went to India since he had jumped bail a year earlier and escaped from house arrest in Madurai city in Tamil Nadu. Balasingham warned Prabhakaran that he would be a long-term loser if he acted solely on his instincts and that he would get sidelined by other Tamil groups willing to shake hands with New Delhi.

erably goaded Prabhakaran to come over to India. He assured the perennially suspicious LTTE leader that he would not be arrested under any circumstances in the light of the changed situation in India. "Stay away from Indian influence but do not ignore India" this was the sum and substance of the message Balasingham conveyed to Prabhakaran.

Balasingham also spoke to Indian officials and requested them to extend training the use of arms to the LTTE too, explaining the reasons why Prabhakaran had been hesitant about moving into Tamil Nadu. The covert training in northern India had already started for other Tamil militant groups including the TELO, EROS and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF). (The EPRLF was told snap links with Naxalites in India).

QUARRELLING BUDDIES

Prabhakaran would make Tamil Nadu his home for the next few years. It was Balasingham who, along with three other colleagues, called on Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran for the first time on behalf of the LTTE to plead for financial assistance and secured it too. This not only proved to be an unexpected financial windfall for the LTTE but also led to a lasting and warm bonhomie between Prabhakaran and the charismatic chief minister of one of India's biggest states the most influential political figure in Tamil Nadu as far as the Eelam struggle was concerned. MGR, a Tamil film star with millions of fans, was married but had no children. This could be one reason he took an instant liking for the aung Prabhakaran. The friendship with MGR, who remained the chief minister for a decade until his death in December 1987, also ensured that Prabhakaran and in the LTTE came to enjoy the blessings of one of India's most powerful politicians has mattered a lot for Sri Lanka.

This was a time when the LTTE leader was seen as just one among various militant leaders from Sri Lanka. Understanding the ways of Indian politicians and their ego play better, the wily Balasingham convinced Prabhakaran to always remain within MGR's orbit and to avoid DMK leader M. Karunanidhi, who was hated by MGR. Prabhakaran followed the advice that ensured enormous advantages, contrast to other Tamil groups, which suffered for maintaining hearty relations with Karunanidhi, who prided himself as a genuine Tamil leader in comparison to MGR.

Again, when Prabhakaran fell in love with a young college student, Mathivathani Erambu, in 1984, he was torn between his passion for her and the rule he had so strictly enforced in the LTTE until then that love affairs were a huge impediment on the path of revolutionaries. After all, it was this violent insistence when Uma Maheshwaran had developed a relationship with a young divorcee that led to the parting of ways between the two men, causing a destabilising break-up in the LTTE. Prabhakaran wondered how others in the LTTE would now react.

When Prabhakaran was wavering and not knowing what to do, it was the elderly Balasingham-married to an Australian after the death of his first wife, a Tamil, -who told him to go ahead and tie the knot with the young woman from Jaffna.

According to Tamil sources, Balasingham convinced Prabhakaran that he would tackle any disaffection in the Tiger ranks. He reportedly told the guerrilla leader, "If anything does go wrong, we will manage." Balasingham succeeded in convincing everyone in the LTTE, where there were mumblings over Prabhakaran's sudden infatuation for a woman, that it was best that the LTTE leader marry his love.

Prabhakaran did wed Mathivathani at a Hindu temple near Madras and they had three children-two sons and a daughter. This was one of the major reasons why the LTTE chief became a virtual devotee of Balasingham and allowed the latter to play a larger role, even if he did not always agree with him.

Balasingham did suffer for his closeness to Prabhakaran. When India found that Prabhakaran was intransigent in 1985 vis-à-vis holding talks with the Sri Lankan government, Indian officials surmised, wrongly, that this was because of the Marxist Balasingham. Accordingly, Balasingham and two other Sri Lankan Tamils were deported from India. It took a while for matters to settle down. At a later meeting with a senior Indian official in the company of other militants, Prabhakaran clarified that while he did pay heed to whatever Balasingham said, it was he who took the final decisions in the LTTE. This was true. Indeed, although Balasingham gave the impression that he wielded influence over Prabhakaran, this was only partly true. The reality was that the man did have ready access to Prabhakaran and the LTTE chief did have a fondness for him, but beyond that, Prabhakaran was too independent and too much of a free bird to be controlled by anyone.

Tamils who observed Prabhakaran and Balasingham both within the LTTE and outside felt they were like a proverbial South Asian couple: they would quarrel bitterly during the day but make up by night; at worst, the next day. But they would never divorce for the sake of the children (read the LTTE). Both needed each other. Prabhakaran felt good to have Balasingham, the worldly wise man, on his side, while Balasingham was more than happy to be seen close to Prabhakaran.

To the politician, Prabhakaran appeared as a shy yet restless young man with intense, piercing eyes.

"He was a small boy then," Janardhanan told this writer in Madras. "He was shy. He had no moustache and looked very innocent." Madras, the verinhkevic Hollywood of the Tamil film industry, could not keep Prabhakaran engaged for long despite the hustle and bustle. Prabhakaran was anxious to return to his country and plunge into militancy again. But his cousin Periya Sothi was in no great hurry to go back to a risky life in Jaffna.

Quite by chance, Prabhakaran met a young Tamil from Jaffina who had escape from a prison in Sri Lanka. He had robbed a bank there. Now he was in Madra 2000-His name was Chetti and carried a criminal record. He also had an urge to reunideo to Jaffna, whatever the danger.

Prabhakaran warmed up to Chetti, angering his cousin. When Prabhakaran refused to listen, Periya Sothi complained to Janardhanan: "I brought Prabhakaran to Madras but he has joined

Chetti." Prabhakaran countered Janardhanan, whom let addressed as Anne, or elder brother, with: "I know they are not doing the right things. But they are active."

As it happens with most men possessed with a cause-real or perceived, justified or unjustified Prabhakaran's early utterances carried clear signs of the length which he was willing to go to uphold that cause. Once, Janardhanan Prabhakaran to a quiet spot along the vast seaside in Madras. Prabhakaran was fascinated by what he saw: "This is the kind of place we need for military training. Janardhanan ignored him. not quite recognising the importance of that comment.

A few weeks later, Prabhakaran departed for Jaffna, taking the sea route Janardhanan was sad to see Prabhakaran go. He had started liking the young man.

Before leaving Tamil Nadu, Prabhakaran and some of his friends briefly led a boatmen life in a coastal town called Vedaranyam. Every meal was the result of a struggle. The Som group frequently went hungry because there was no money to buy food. Often they would eat small quantities of food distributed to devotees at a Hindu temple. If and when they chanced upon some money, it was just enough to buy cheap rice lactinid, with curd. There were times when Prabhakaran and his friends swallowed sleeping pills in a desperate bid to stifle hunger.

By the time Prabhakaran landed in Jaffna. The Indian state was a safe place to be. But despite its mammoth Tamil population, no one, barring a handful like Janardhan sympathised with the condition of the Tamil counterparts in Sri Lanka. The situation would change radically in a decade.

Prabhakaran was back in Jaffna. He found it more embittered and turbulent. An international conference organised in Jaffna in January 1974 had ended in violence, triggering clashes between the participants and the police. Nine people died when, during the melee, an overhead electric wire snapped and electrocuted the victims.

Tamils blamed the government for the incident.