

## CURRENT EVENTS

TAMIL NADU

### The Militant Menace



KANDASAMY Durairaja, 49, a Jaffna Tamil and formerly a prosperous merchant from Trincomalee, took refuge with his family in Madras about two years ago. Last month, Durairaja was returning to his flat in Mylapore in the heart of Madras, when he was abducted by armed youths. The kidnapers demanded Rs 6 lakh as ransom for his release. Durairaja was forced to write letters to his wife imploring her to somehow raise the money and give it to the boys, otherwise he would be killed.

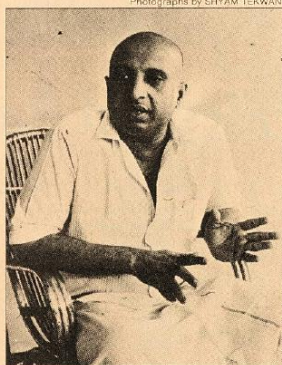
Three weeks earlier, a gang of revolver and sub-machine-gun wielding militants had stormed their way into the posh Anna Nagar residence of Thamodharam Manivasagam, a rich businessman hailing from coastal Valvettithurai town in the Jaffna peninsula, now a

dras, was also kidnapped from his Arumbakkam residence on the outskirts of the city.

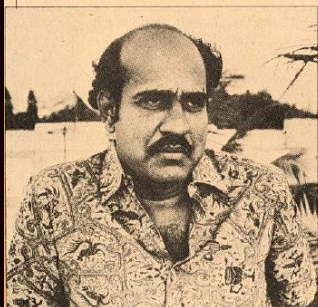
The families of these kidnapped Jaffna businessmen preferred not to lodge formal police complaints. The reason adduced was that they had been warned of militant reprisals in case they chose to do so. But top police officials had

Thamodharam Manivasagam

Photographs by SHYAM TERKAMANI



**Tamil militants are now kidnapping rich Jaffna businessmen—who have taken refuge in Madras—to acquire much needed funds.**



Kadirvelu Mohandas

director in a Singapore shipping company, and spirited him away. The boys demanded a ransom of Rs 25 lakh from his family. His wife paid up Rs 3.5 lakh.

Yet another bunch of armed Tamil youths whisked away another rich Jaffna businessman, Siniyah Kadirvelu Mohandas, from the same Anna Nagar locality, and demanded Rs 5 lakh for his release. Mohandas was tortured by his kidnapers, and left to spend his nights in a mosquito-infested toilet. In yet another similar incident around the same time, Suryakumar, a Sri Lankan Tamil travel agent operating now from Ma-

been privately informed and the cops had spread their dragnet.

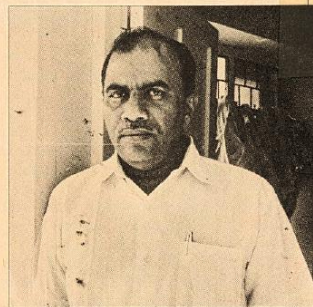
On the morning of February 16, events came to a head. Durairaja's captors had told his wife that they were prepared to show her husband to their 11-year-old son, Mayuran, if the boy was brought to a prominent hotel in central Madras. There was an unofficial police trap laid for the militants at the hotel. As Mayuran was picked up and taken in a car by the kidnapers, a plainclothes policeman got into an autorickshaw

with Durairaja's wife and gave chase. Luckily, the speeding car hit a scooter in west Madras, and as the public closed in on the car Mayuran shouted that he was being kidnapped.

Two of the four kidnapers managed to escape while the public caught the others. Police subsequently identified them as Selvam, 24, and Subramaniam, 25, belonging to the Peoples Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), headed by Uma Maheshwaran.

Based on the information extorted from the two PLOTE militants, police parties fanned out into different areas of west Madras and rounded up 40 PLOTE members of the Uma Maheshwaran group. The same night Manivasagam was released by his gaolers. Subsequently, the shipping company director's relative who had handed over Rs 3.5 lakh to his kidnapers was able to identify the recipient, another PLOTE member. And, thanks to the large-scale round-ups, Durairaja was also set at liberty the following morning.

But Mohandas had yet to be traced. The police crackdown on the PLOTE did not bring about his release, so it was



Kandasamy Durairaja

obviously another group that was holding him captive. Luckily, a couple of days later, an anonymous telephone caller ordered Mohandas' wife Bhagavathi to produce Rs 5 lakh in half-an-hour, and hand the money over to her husband's kidnapers near the Ayyappa Temple at Anna Nagar. Policemen, who had tapped her telephone, asked her to plead for a little more time, which was granted.

Well before the appointed hour, over 25 policemen in disguise had surrounded the rendezvous, some as Ayyappa devotees and others as vegetable vendors. At the scheduled time four

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men appeared on the scene. As the money changed hands, policemen pounced on the four, all of whom turned out to be important members of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO). Following the arrests, the police were able to free Mohandas that night from a hut in Koyambedu on the fringes of Madras city. Forty-five TELO members were also taken into custody.

The police have concluded, after all their investigations, that groups like PLOTE and TELO, which have started disintegrating as a result of serious internal factional quarrels, are facing an acute shortage of funds and are getting increasingly tempted to resort to kidnappings for ransom. In November last year, Point Pedro (in Jaffna) businessman K.T. Rajasingham and travel agent K. Jeyarathnam were kidnapped by Tamil militants and released only after realisation of the demanded ransoms. After the Liberation Tigers proved their domination of the militant struggle, donations from expatriate and other Sri Lankan Tamils to the other militant groups started thinning down and they are now struggling to even sustain themselves. Corroborated Durairaja: "I found that my kidnapers were having only bread for breakfast, lunch and dinner on most days."

The latest series of kidnappings and the fact that desperate Tamil militants belonging to the smaller groups have begun to openly come out in the streets of Madras toting guns has come as the proverbial last straw for the people of Tamil Nadu. Said Madras Police Commissioner Walter Dewaram: "Sri Lankan Tamil refugees here should realise that they are our guests and have to behave themselves to continue to enjoy our hospitality." PLOTE spokesman A.S. Skanda says blandly: "We did not kidnap Durairaja. We arrested him because we had given him money for safe-keeping and he has not returned it." While Srikant, the TELO spokesman, says that certain irresponsible members of the group were responsible for the Mohandas kidnapping and they have been expelled. But the militants are now under considerable public pressure.

However, the militarily-most powerful militant group, the LTTE, and the Eelam revolutionary organisers who have recently been working in close cooperation with the Tigers still enjoy public support. Otherwise Tamil Nadu's sympathy for the cause of the Tamils of Sri Lanka would have by now been drowned in disenchantment with militant misbehaviour.

—S.H. VENKATRAMANI