

From boys to guerrillas



Tigers of Lanka: From Boys To Guerrillas
M. R. Narayan Swamy (Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi) Rs. 350/-
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At a time when an end to the civil war and the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is being debated, "Tigers of Lanka: From Boys to Guerrillas" affords topical and illuminating reading. This is a book written after patient and diligent investigation, and enriched by his personal interest, knowledge and understanding M. R. Narayan Swamy provides the reader with a deep and clear insight into many matters which otherwise would have been incomprehensible or hazily understood in regard to the long lasting ethnic strife in Sri Lanka.

All the players in the sad and sordid ethnic conflict and violence which seems to go on and on in Sri Lanka appear as characters that could evoke only cynicism about human character. The two principal political parties in the governance of Sri Lanka, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) had over the years been insensitive to the Tamil demands. Frustrated as the Tamil political leadership was owing to this response, on May 14, 1976 the leadership proclaimed that the only salvation for the discriminated Tamils lay in establishing Eelam or a separate Tamil state. Coincidentally on May 5, 1976, Velupillai Prabhakaran had founded the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which still remains today intractable and intransigent in fighting the Sri Lankan government in the quest for autonomy for the Tamils, if not for a separate state now. In any settlement of the conflict now the LTTE has to be reckoned with.

The infighting

This book gives a vivid account, exhaustively and coherently, of the origins and growth of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. In this phenomenon, the role of a leader like Amirthalingam who gave support to these militants in the initial stages particularly, and the part he played thereafter is well delineated. The activities of Mavai Senadirajah, Murugesu Sivasthambaram and others of the earlier Federal Party (FP) and late the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in regard to the struggle for the rights of the Tamils and the endeavour of Neelan Tiruchelvan to persevere with talks when the militant groups had forfeited their faith in discussions with the Sri Lankan government are traced by the author. And interesting data are provided about Tissa Jayakoddy, the Deputy High Commissioner and his nexus with the groups.

To those who wish to gain a good grasp of what ails Sri Lanka even



Tamil militants: the LTTE emerged as the most ruthlessly dominant force

today and why it has still failed to become a nation in the true sense of the word, this book can supply some of the answers. It surveys the birth of militancy, the provocation for it provided by the governments of Sri Lanka, and in the final chapter the conclusion is made that to end the Tamil ethnic conflict amicably the Sri Lankan government would have to announce a package that would satisfy the Tamil sentiments at large and then try to build a national consensus around it. The writer emphasises that dragging its (government's) feet now would lead only to more deaths, destruction and despair. One cannot disagree with him.

The 11 chapters in this survey graphically describe how from the start itself suspicion kept the militant groups apart although at times they would throw in their lot on carrying out a dangerous but dare devil attack that would leave the Sri Lankan government badly hurt and its morale shattered. More chilling are the accounts of how one militant group goes on to exterminate the other, and then another, and so on. Evidently at no stage, and certainly not for long, did any

love prevail between the diverse groups. And the groups were so numerous: Eelam Liberation Organisation (ELO), Eelam National Democratic Liberation Front (ENDLF), Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF), Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), Eelam Revolutionary Communist Party (ERCP), Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS), General Union of Eelam Students (GUES), Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), and Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO). Even this list may not furnish a comprehensive enumeration of groups and factions. But, of course, of these only a few really matter, and in any case one by one the groups get driven to the wall until the LTTE emerges as the most ruthlessly dominant force, and remains to be so.

It is interesting also to note how one group is more favoured by India at one time and then another one displaces it in the good books of the Indian authorities. And the Indian authorities and agencies also appear to have worked independent of one another - the Indian

diplomatic community would not know the moves of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and likewise the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) would not know what the diplomats or the RAW were up to. Hardly any coordination prevailed and actions were shrouded in secrecy and concealment. They acted often separately.

The role of Tamil Nadu

The author's investigations that reveal torture, conscription and brute force employed by the militant groups make spine tingling reading indeed. Some of the groups especially come out as atrocious and inhumane in their behaviour although one cannot say that any group had its hands clean. An excellent understanding is gained of the nature of the militant groups - those who appear to be humane now were really barbarous then according to the accounts in the study. And one group is not averse to enslaving or even exterminating another as each one sought sole mastery although all of them professed to be "liberators" of the same people.

Narayan Swamy reveals quite an amount of information about Tamil Nadu's role, training camps, acquisition of arms, and of the exploits earned out by these groups beginning with the killing of Mayor Alfred Duraiappah and Inspector Bastiampillai, the attacks on the Sri Lankan army, and other such deeds. One begins to understand the different agenda of the various parties that were embroiled in the long drawn out conflict. India had her own objectives, the RAW their own designs, the TULF's plans were different and the various groups harboured their own aims. The writer makes out how one tries to outwit the other and fails in the endeavour. The waxing and waning fortunes of each group are vividly traced. Deceit, treachery, chicanery and prevarication of which so much is detailed tell the reader a tale of intrigue and double dealing that has been endemic in the ethnic conflict.

The TELO getting embroiled in a violent conflict with the LTTE, the latter's onslaught on the former's camps and its near annihilation of the TELO and then the killings of the EPRLF leadership make gruesome reading. The PLOTE and its activities that are outlined are equally frightful. Much more of such horrible accounts are related. Sadly, the IPKF comes out poorly but not through any intrinsic fault.

Author Narayan Swamy piles facts after facts and details after detail to give the reader a cogent and impressive recount of the ethnic strife that has hurt and still bedevils Sri Lanka. He writes lucidly and in a simple pleasant to read style of the history of the origins of the ethnic conflict and its deterioration into brutal violence over the years. To those who are interested in the contemporary situation in Sri Lanka this is compulsory and interesting reading. Narayan Swamy does not spare the misjudgement of the Indian political big wigs; the errors in the intelligence of RAW and their duplicity; the naivety of the Indian diplomatic entity in Sri Lanka; the fundamental cardinal ceasefire faults of the Sri Lankan political leadership; and the bloody nature of the Sri Lankan militant groups. One cannot but recognise that the IPKF had all along been misled, misinformed and misdirected - it is judicious study indeed that sheds much understanding on the IPKF who had been so maligned. The culpability lies with others.