

Pooneryn : Prabha's strategic thinking

The attack on the Pooneryn camp was expected for some time. The LTTE had on several occasions promised the people of Jaffna that they would soon open a safe passage to the peninsula from the mainland. And hence, as the Maaveerar vaaram (Great Warriors' Week) approached it appeared that the Pooneryn camp was the target that the LTTE was planning to overrun to mark the occasion.

The Tigers had instructed the people of the north to put up Pandols along the roads and prepare for this celebration. The LTTE says that the 'Maaveerar Week' is commemorated during this particular period because their first martyr Shankar's (Sathianathan) who was wounded in a shoot out with the army in Jaffna and later died while being treated in Tamil Nadu) death anniversary falls on November 24. But it is also well known today that Prabhakaran's birthday is on November 26. The whole thing, I am sure must have been known to the government's intelligence agencies. The LTTE had been engaging in a major build up in the north at the cost of foregoing many opportunities in the eastern province. It had been pointed out on several occasions that the Tiger leadership was quite consciously and systematically reducing its troop levels in that region and was limiting its interest only to collecting taxes from well to do people there.

The military hierarchy it, was apparent, had taken this as a clear indication of a strategic weakness in the LTTE's ability to take on the army in the hinter-

lands of the east.

It was argued in these columns two weeks ago that the LTTE had several important reasons for concentrating its military resources in the north instead of harassing and distracting the army with guerrilla operations in the eastern province. And the most important one of them was that in the north it was possible for the LTTE to achieve a maximum concentration of forces to overwhelm the army's strength at a decisive point.

However the main attraction in political and diplomatic circles was some naive talk about pacifying the east and holding local government elections there early next year.

The Tigers have launched the attack on the Pooneryn base mainly on the strength of the lessons that they had learnt from the battle for the Elephant Pass base in July, August 1991. A brief examination of these would provide some background for understanding the nature of the disaster at Pooneryn.

The first lesson that the Tigers learnt from the critical reappraisal of their failure to take Elephant Pass was that the concentration of force at the decisive place and time should not be dispersed even slightly until the target is overwhelmed.

The Tigers failed singularly at Elephant Pass to observe this principle which both Clausewitz and Jomini have exalted as the central feature of successful strategy. A detailed account of the preparation for and the overrunning of the Mankulam camp in November 1990 written in the form of an emotively vivid memoir by

Captain Malaravan who was commander of an LTTE artillery unit, shows how Balraj — then commander of the LTTE's Vanni sector — Sustained the concentration of the military power and the momentum it had achieved in the first phase of that assault which involved pounding the crucial bunkers on the outer periphery of the camp and then storming them through the open mine fields. Even if there had been a slight distraction from this concentration of force, observes Malaravan, in the face of a contingency, then the whole operation would have been doomed.

At Elephant Pass Balraj who was put in charge of overrunning the defences on the southern side of the base completed his task before schedule whereas the groups were to overrun the northern side had made slow progress and were thwarted in their objective by two wrong decisions taken by their high command in disregard to the principle of the concentration of forces at the decisive place and time. The first one was made when the Tiger high command thought it necessary to secure the much valued artillery pieces in the core of the base by compelling the troops there to surrender by letting up the momentum of the assault. The second mistake was made when large numbers of troops were diverted to from the concentration to halt the army's advance from Vetti-laikerni.

Since the Elephant Pass battle it has been very clear in analyses appearing in Tiger publications that the strategic value of the principle of concentration was fully

appreciated by the LTTE's high command in their overall and specific military planning. Therefore, while almost everyone, as I pointed out two weeks ago, was passing judgement on the course of Eelam War Two on the basis of the LTTE's seeming military weakness in the east, Prabhakaran was working towards a decisive concentration of

it came to real fighting. The second lesson of Elephant Pass which the LTTE appears to have given serious consideration to in the timing of the Pooneryn attack is that it must overcome its inability to counter air power by selecting the time of attack during the north east monsoon. In the Elephant Pass battle the Tigers lost a very large

important part of the main assault and that it is most difficult to achieve under heavy air attack.

Although the monsoon could pose innumerable difficulties to the attackers such as trenches filling up with water, it can create a certain psychological disadvantage among the defending troops of the army and their tactical decisions in-

laikerni landing was made easy because among other things the sea is not turbulent, during July-August.

The third lesson which the LTTE incorporated into its strategic planning in the aftermath of Elephant Pass is the careful attention to the hinterland geography of a military target. This was evident in their post mortem

consolidation of this promontory. That they have been able to repel two major attempts by the security forces on Thursday night and Friday shows very clearly that the Tiger groups sent in to establish coastal defences particularly in and around Kaimunai — the shore on the promontory which lies closest to the Mandathivu island — have achieved their objective. The overrunning of the Nagathevanthurai naval base which lies above the Mannithalai promontory is an indispensable aim in the first phase of an assault on Pooneryn because that point is absolutely necessary to achieve and sustain naval dominance over the promontory which was the main lifeline to the base.

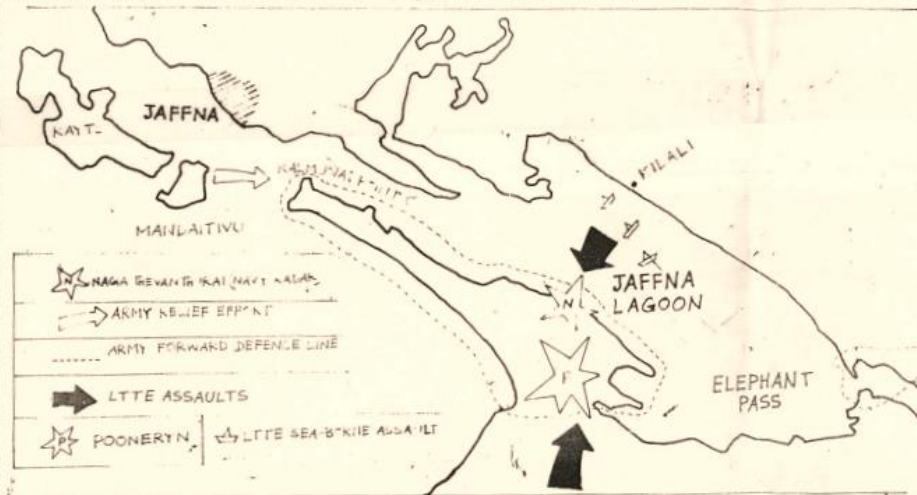
The fight from Vetti-laikerni towards Elephant Pass was an entirely different matter. The Tigers had not vouched for something like Balavegaya from the coast. In the case of Pooneryn however they first dug into the army's main supply route knowing full well that even if the army were to gain the smallest foothold on the beaches of the Mannithalai promontory it would simply be a cakewalk for the troops towards those areas of Pooneryn where fragments of the two battalions which were at the base are faced with annihilation or surrender.

It is obvious that a massive effort must have been taken place on the part of the Tigers simultaneously with the main assault on the camp, to build up defences in the wet sands

of the promontory. The army's apparent complacency about an impending attack on Pooneryn may be attributed to the fact it was naively assumed that the Tigers could not swiftly dominate the base of Nagathevanthurai and militarily dominate the promontory simultaneously and within a short time before the Pooneryn command could send in reinforcements to hold on to their lifeline at whatever the cost until Mandathivu military base could connect up with them.

This in my view seems to have been the fatal flaw in the army's strategic perceptions about Pooneryn and the Jaffna lagoon. Their mainly political preoccupation with the east made them overlook the level of concentration that Prabhakaran was aiming at even foregoing his organisation's standing in the politically sensitive east.

His thinking, which is quite evident at Pooneryn can best be summed up in the words of Carl Von Clausewitz. "Much more frequently the relative superiority — that is, the skilful assemblage of superior forces at the decisive point — has its foundation in the right appreciation of those points, in the judicious direction which by that means has been given to the forces from the very first, and in the resolution required to sacrifice the unimportant to the advantage of the important — that is to keep the forces concentrated in an overpowering mass."



his military resources to overwhelm Pooneryn. And this time the concentration and momentum of forces he had assembled appear to have not been given the slightest chance to be influenced by tactical decisions arising from contingencies and new priorities.

This principal sounds so simple but yet military leaders in every age have found it to be one of the toughest to observe when

view of the limitation it places on the use of air power against enemy positions. The effect of this psychological drawback was quite evident in the Mankulam camp commander's decision to vacate the camp before the Tigers could storm the main point of his defences.

The monsoon also poses problems for swift transport of reinforcements by sea. The Vetti-

laikerni landing was made easy because among other things the sea is not turbulent, during July-August.

One of the top priorities of the LTTE when attacking Pooneryn would have been the absolute con-

by Taraki