

Chapter III

THE LTTE: ORIGIN, ORGANISATION, LEADERSHIP, SOCIAL COMPOSITION

From its inception, the militant movement of the Tamils of Sri Lanka has been constituted by a multiplicity of groups. Most of these groups emerged due to the splintering of larger outfits, caused by differences on policies or tactics, or personal ambitions and rivalries. While a few groups limited their activities to pamphleteering, others shot into prominence with a robbery or an ambush and then faded into insignificance. However, five groups - LTTE, PLOT, TELO, EROS, and EPRLF have been in the forefront for some time.

Of these five ascendant groups, the LTTE has dominated the scene to the present day. This chapter's first concern is with tracing the LTTE's origin. The organisational structure, leadership and social composition of the LTTE will also be examined.

ORIGIN

Establishing the origin of the LTTE or of the other militant groups is extremely difficult as all the groups claim to be the original one. Since most of them have evolved out of the fission or fusion of various groups and factions, it is difficult to delineate clearly how or when a group originated.

According to the LTTE's version, it had its "historical birth" in 1972 when its predecessor the TNT was formed.¹ However, the LTTE's claim to being the oldest of the militant groups is refuted by TELO which points out

¹ LTTE, Political Committee, Liberation Tigers and Tamil Eelam Freedom Struggle (Madras, 1983), p.25.

that it (TELO) was founded in 1968 by Kuttimani and Thangaturai.² Nonetheless, it is believed that the old TELO was different from the TELO that was active in the 1980s.³ The EROS, founded by the Marxist intellectual Ratnasabapathy, originated among the Tamil expatriates in London. Though formed in 1975, many of its members had been active even earlier in the radical politics of the TMP.⁴ The EPRLF was formed in 1981, following a split in EROS.⁵

According to the LTTE, militancy was forced on the Tamils. The "violent oppression" of the Tamils by the "Sinhala nation", jeopardised the former's existence, making life within a unitary Sri Lanka "intolerable and impossible".⁶ For over two decades, the Tamil political parties used nonviolent means to win back "basic human rights" for the Tamils. But this,

² G.Srikantan (Spokesman, TELO), interviewed in Colombo in June 1993. A TELO booklet published in 1985 claims that TELO was founded 14 years ago. This puts its origin at 1971-72. Later in the same booklet it states that TELO was founded 12 years earlier, i.e. around 1973-74. TELO, Propaganda Unit, Final Victory is Ours (n.p., 1985), p.3 and p.11.

³ For details, see Kumar David, "Roots and Results of Racism in Sri Lanka", in Kumar David and Santisalan Kadirgamar, eds., Ethnicity: Identity, Conflict, Crisis (Kowloon, Hongkong, 1989), p.231.

⁴ *ibid.*, p.231 and p. 238.

⁵ The EPRLF points out that the LTTE's claim to be the pioneer is "highly exaggerated" and cites the involvement of several EPRLF members like Padmanabha and Perumal in the radicalism of the early 1970s. L.Ketheswaran (Spokesman, EPRLF), interviewed in Colombo in June 1993. For details of the genesis of EPRLF, see EPRLF, Political Propaganda Department, E.P.R.L.F. and Eelam Resistance Movement: An Overview (Madras, 1989), p.6.

⁶ LTTE, Political Wing, You Too India (n.p., n.d.), p.2 and LTTE, Political Committee, n.1, p.8.

the LTTE points out, was met with brutal suppression. Since the major contradiction was the "national friction between [the] two nations", the "oppressed" nation was forced to demand secession.⁷ Peaceful campaigns having failed, the Tamils were left with no option but a "revolutionary resistance to defend themselves against a savage form of state terrorism."⁸

The LTTE claims that the student radicals of the 1970s influenced its early evolution and acknowledges the contribution of Sivakumaran.⁹ While the genesis of the LTTE may have been influenced by radical students, few of them actually joined it. Of the 42 Tamil youth who were arrested, only one, Kasi Anandan, joined the LTTE in 1983 after having been with the TULF till 1977. In fact, most of the early radicals joined EROS, EPRLF, and PLOT rather than the LTTE.¹⁰

Another current prevalent in Tamil society which had a profound influence on the LTTE was the fishing-smuggling community of Valvettiturai. Many of the smugglers were involved in gun-running and in the prevailing turmoil, they came to play a significant political role. Early associates of Prabakaran like Thangaturai, Kuttimani, and Chetti were known

⁷ LTTE, Political Committee, "The Struggle for Tamil Eelam and the Liberation Tigers" (November 1978), in LTTE, Political Committee, Towards Liberation: Selected Political Documents of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (n.p., 1984), p.3.

⁸ LTTE, Political Wing, n.6, p.3.

⁹ LTTE, Political Committee, n.1, p.24.

¹⁰ Mavai Senathirajah (Secretary, FP's Youth League in the 1970s; Currently TULF MP), interviewed in Colombo in June 1993.

criminals.¹¹ Not surprisingly, the LTTE makes no mention of these criminal elements. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that their role in its evolution cannot be overlooked.¹²

What was the LTTE's relationship with the TNT and how did Prabakaran emerge as its leader? There are several explanations. The LTTE claims that the TNT was its forerunner and that it assumed the name Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam on 5 May 1976. The LTTE speaks of only Prabakaran as its founder and makes no mention of any power struggle.¹³ However, Kasi Anandan acknowledges that there was an early power struggle. According to him, a group had been operating from 1972 and it came to be known as the TNT in 1974. He claims that initially "this group had no leader as such". When one Chetti Thanabalasingham was imprisoned, Prabakaran expelled him from the movement, formed the LTTE and became its leader. Later, Prabakaran killed Chetti and consolidated his position.¹⁴

A second version of the LTTE's origin is that the TNT was a militant faction within the TUF Youth League. At that time it was led by Prabakaran, Pathmanathan and Chetti. With other Youth Leaguers like Sathiyaseelan emigrating, and Mavai Senathirajah turning moderate, the TNT became

¹¹ For details, see Sinha Ratnatunga, Politics of Terrorism: The Sri Lanka Experience (Canberra, 1988), pp.72-75.

¹² It must be noted however, that smuggling has been an important occupation among the fishing community of Valvettiturai for centuries and is socially accepted here as a way of life. Consequently, the illegal nature of smuggling must not be given undue importance.

¹³ LTTE, Political Committee, n.1, pp. 25-26.

¹⁴ Kasi Anandan (Member of Political Wing, LTTE), interviewed in Madras in May 1993.

dominant. It was joined by other radicals and in May 1975 the LTTE was formed. Chetti killed Pathmanathan and was himself killed by Prabhakaran, who then emerged as its leader.¹⁵

It is also alleged that Chetti fled to India after a jailbreak. Here he met Prabhakaran and together they founded the TNT. Chetti was imprisoned soon after. Prabhakaran eliminated Saravanan and declared himself as the leader.¹⁶

Though the origins of the LTTE are shrouded in confusion one thing is clear that the LTTE was influenced by student radicalisation and that it evolved from the smuggling-fishing community of Valvettiturai. While its forerunner, the TNT, may have been active from the early 1970s, it is probable that it was just one among the many militant outfits active in those years. Notwithstanding the silence of LTTE publications on the issue of a leadership contest in the organisation, it is evident that a power struggle within the group continued throughout the 1970s.

THE ORGANISATION

A high level of strictly maintained secrecy surrounds the organisation of the LTTE. Few details are known about its organisational structure. The following discussion has been substantiated by interviews conducted in Sri Lanka and India. The LTTE's organisation will be examined with reference to both its hierarchical nature and the existence of its highly specialised wings.

¹⁵ T.D.S.A. Dissanayaka, The Agony of Sri Lanka: An In-Depth Account of the Racial Riots of 1983 (Colombo, 1983), pp.31-32.

¹⁶ David, n.3, p.232.

A Hierarchical Structure

The structure of the LTTE has undergone considerable change over time. In its initial years, since it had a small membership the LTTE functioned as a centrifugal organisation. Decisions were made collectively by a Central Committee. This was dissolved in 1979-80, soon after the Prabakaran-Maheswaran split.¹⁷ With the rapid expansion in its membership a centrifugal structure now became unfeasible. According to the Indian intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), around 1984, a more complex hierarchical structure emerged which took firm roots by end-1987.¹⁸

At the apex of the LTTE is Prabakaran, its supreme leader and military commander. A Senior Committee having no formal existence has as its members, close associates of Prabakaran like Mahthaiya, Baby Subramaniam, Kittu, Appiah Annan, and Sornalingam. Its members are not elected but become a part of the Senior Committee by virtue of their closeness to Prabakaran.¹⁹ This is in contrast to the EPRLF where the General Secretary and members of the Politbureau are elected by the Central Committee, which in turn is elected by the Congress, which consists of representatives from its Front organisations.²⁰

¹⁷ Taraki, "LTTE Invests in Tamil Nadu Nationalism", *The Island*, 1 April 1990. Reproduced in Taraki, *The Eluding Peace (An Insider's Political Analysis of the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka)* (Sarcelles, 1991), p.38. RAW Official, interviewed in New Delhi in March 1994.

¹⁸ RAW Official, *ibid.*

¹⁹ D.P.Sivaram (Former Member, PLOT), interviewed in Colombo in June 1993.

²⁰ 'Kanapathy' (Member, EPRLF), interviewed in New Delhi in October 1994.

Under Prabhakaran and the Central Committee, come the regional commanders, district leaders, area leaders, and the fighting cadres. (These tiers will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.) At the bottom rung are the *potiyans* - the young boys and girls who carry out a variety of assignments ranging from carrying of messages and supplies, treating of patients, to abductions and assassinations.²¹

The complexity of the LTTE is revealed not so much in its tiered structure as in its highly specialised wings. Among these are the Military Wing, the Political Wing, the Naval Wing, the Intelligence Wing, the Women's Unit, the Suicide Squad, Communications Unit, Finance Unit, Arms and Ammunition Manufacture, Research and Development, and Rehabilitation. Some of these are discussed below.

The Military Wing

From its inception the LTTE has been an efficient but ruthless military organisation. The hierarchical structure of the organisation is most clearly visible in the Military Wing.

The LTTE is organised in three commands - Jaffna Peninsula, Vanni and the East. These are further divided into zones or sub-areas. The zones are Jaffna, Vadamarachchi, Mannar, Mullaittivu, Killinochchi-Vavuniya, Trincomalee-Muttur, and Batticaloa-Amparai. Although Mannar and Mullaittivu are districts, they are treated as zones because of their strategic importance. Then come the military districts.²²

²¹ S.C.Sardeshpande, Assignment Jaffna (New Delhi, 1992), pp.25-26.

²² Sivaram, n.19.

According to Yogi, a prominent member of the LTTE's Political Wing, there are eight district commands within the LTTE. These coincide more or less with the administrative districts. Every district is under the charge of a regional commander, who holds the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Below him are small groups led by Captains, Lieutenants and Second Lieutenants. Depending on the size, population and strength of the LTTE in the region, some districts are further divided into areas, each under a Major. Jaffna district for instance, is divided into three sub-areas.²³

Notwithstanding its clearly defined hierarchical structure, the LTTE does not have a formal ranking system.²⁴ No living Tiger has military titles. It is only in death that such honours are given. Baby Subramaniam (who is currently ranked second in the LTTE) observes that in the LTTE everyone is equal, with Prabakaran as "the first amongst equals".²⁵ It appears that while the hierarchy operates with regard to the issuing and executing of orders, the interaction among all Tigers is very informal. Moreover, all Tigers irrespective of their positions enjoy the same facilities.²⁶

To what extent is the LTTE a decentralised organisation? According to Yogi, regional commanders enjoy considerable power and autonomy, and they contact Prabakaran only on "major issues". Likewise, area commanders too

²³ Rohan Gunasekera, "Cyanide Cult: Yogi Gives the Lowdown", The Island (Colombo), 6 August 1989.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ K.P.Sunil, "Inside Tiger Territory", Sunday Observer (Bombay), 28 March-4 April 1992.

²⁶ This was an observation made by many IPKF Officers interviewed. Also, see K.P.Sunil, "In the Tigers' Lair", Illustrated Weekly of India (Bombay), 21-27 May 1989, p. 27.

have some autonomy. An area leader must discuss major operations with his regional commander.²⁷ Moreover, if the first tier is on the run, area leaders enjoy autonomy of action and are not debilitated due to a lack of orders or a failure of communication.²⁸

Regional commanders are free to decide on problems affecting their commands. However, on issues that concern the "national interests of the Tamil people" it is Prabhakaran who makes all the decisions. Balasingham (spokesman of the LTTE) explains that if a delegation from Colombo comes to Jaffna to hold talks with the LTTE's regional commander on issues relating to the national problem of the Tamils, then the regional commander gets Prabhakaran's permission and is briefed on how to deal with political issues.²⁹

While allowing his regional commanders and area leaders some autonomy, Prabhakaran makes sure that none of them can consolidate their power in the area. When he was based in Madras (till January 1987) he achieved this by channeling arms and finance directly to the district commander. Moreover, the Madras-based leadership ensured that it was the only one which kept contact with RAW. The island-based leaders could not strike separate deals with RAW and were dependent entirely on Prabhakaran.³⁰

²⁷ Gunasekera, n.23.

²⁸ Shankar Bhaduri and Afsir Karim, The Sri Lankan Crisis (New Delhi, 1990), p.128.

²⁹ T.S.Subramanian, "Spotlight on the LTTE", Frontline (Madras), vol.4, no.1, 10-23 January 1987, p.21.

³⁰ Taraki, "The Importance of *Pin Thalam*", The Island, 29 October 1989. Reproduced in Taraki, n.17, p.3.

It appears then, that while the structure of the organisation ensures that Prabakaran is in firm control, in minor operations and daily functioning the LTTE is decentralised. This clearly has worked to the LTTE's advantage.

Compared to the LTTE, the EPRLF was far more decentralised. However, this did not apply to conflict resolution especially when disputes arose between its Military and Political Wings, where the conflict was not resolved immediately but referred to the Regional Committee.³¹ This resulted in delays in decision making and hampered operations.

The Arms and Ammunition Wing

The LTTE's capacity to sustain a protracted war is a function not only of the tenacity and fighting prowess of its members, but also of its highly developed military infrastructure. In order to reduce costs and dependence on external sources the LTTE has developed its own indigenous ordnance factories manufacturing devices ranging from Johnny mines to Pasilan-2000s and a variety of other mortars, grenades, and land mines.³² It is in the manufacture and use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) that the LTTE has shown most expertise.³³

³¹ 'Raghu' (Former Member of Central Committee, EPRLF), interviewed in Colombo in June 1993.

³² Robert McDonald, "Fighting with the Tamil Tigers", Janes Defence Weekly (London), 1 August 1987, pp. 192-3.

³³ For a detailed discussion of IEDs used by the LTTE, see Binay Kumar, "Improvised Explosive Devices Encountered by IPKF in Sri Lanka and Its Countermeasures", The Infantry-India (Mhow), vol.62, December 1989, pp.44-48. Also, see "IPKF: Vicious Experience", India Today (New Delhi), vol. 16, no.12, 16-30 June 1991, pp.50-51; Shekhar Gupta, "Operation Pawan: In a Rush to Vanquish", India Today, vol.13, no.2, 16-31 January 1988, p.76.

Another vital aspect of the LTTE's military infrastructure is its elaborate system of bunkers and bases. Used for meetings to plan and coordinate operations, to rest and regroup, these bases played a crucial role in the LTTE's survival especially in 1988-89.³⁴

The Communications Unit

The LTTE has an incredible communications network "rarely matched by any other insurgent group the world over."³⁵ All LTTE camps are linked by radio. Area commanders keep in touch with Headquarters through walkie-talkies.³⁶ The LTTE's communication technology is advanced with high powered, high frequency transmitters and facsimile facilities.³⁷ In addition to this electronic communications network is its courier system - a complex chain of members and sympathisers who can deliver messages anywhere.³⁸

The Political Wing

The LTTE claims it has a "politico-military structure" engaged in building political and military bases among the people, from its inception.³⁹ It also claims that it has been organising and politicising the masses, establishing "clandestine cells" in the Tamil areas, recruiting "workers

³⁴ For a description of the Nithikaikulam base, see National Herald (New Delhi), 2 September 1988.

³⁵ Sardeshpande, n.21, p.28.

³⁶ Rohan Gunaratna, War and Peace in Sri Lanka (Kandy, 1987), p.38.

³⁷ Yashwant Deva, "Communication Issues: Of Pawan and the Assassination", Frontline, vol.9, no.4, 15-28 February 1992, p.79.

³⁸ Sumir Lal, "Nemesis: The Tigers India Trained", The Telegraph (Calcutta), 1 November 1987.

³⁹ LTTE, Political Committee, n.1, pp.26-27.

peasants, students and revolutionary intellectuals" to the movement .⁴⁰

Though the LTTE insists that it has distinct Political and Military Wings, there appears to be only a nominal difference between the two, for all Tigers are involved in political and military activities,⁴¹ and do political work only "when conditions allow" them to do so.⁴²

In 1989, a more formal separation between the Political and Military Wings occurred with the setting up of the People's Front of Liberation Tigers (PFLT). It was established ostensibly for participating in elections. It set up offices in towns to deal with public grievances⁴³ and it participated in negotiations with Colombo in 1989-90.

The LTTE's Political Wing has been involved mainly in propaganda work. It also deals with Governments and their agencies. It runs a parallel administration in Jaffna with the result that Jaffna has been under dual administration since 1986; Colombo only in nominal control and the LTTE in actual control. The LTTE's parallel administration has demonstrated that it can not only 'liberate' Tamil areas but also hold and administer them. Its

⁴⁰ Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Diary of Combat (1975-1984): A Historical and Chronological Sketch of the Armed Resistance Campaign of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (n.p.,n.d.),p.12.

⁴¹ For instance, Yogi initially did propaganda work for the LTTE in Madras. Then he functioned as a political activist in Vadamarachchi. During Operation Liberation, he participated in the fighting. For some time he worked with refugees in Thenmarachchi. From July 1987, he returned to political work. Gunasekera, n.23.

⁴² McDonald, n.32, p.191.

⁴³ Iqbal Athas, "Reconquest of Jaffna by the 'Tigers' ", Tamil Times (Surrey), vol.9, no.4, 15 March 1990, p.11.

administrative system has covered, among other subjects, law and order, taxation, transport, education, and public health. The LTTE however lost its control over Jaffna when it was fighting the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF).

The propaganda wing of the LTTE has published numerous booklets describing the struggle of the Tigers and the atrocities committed by their enemies. Besides controlling the 'independent press' of Jaffna,⁴⁴ it runs a television network, publishes newspapers like Hot Spring and Īlanātan and broadcasts programmes over the radio. It also performs the task of issuing press statements.

While the LTTE's Military Wing is undoubtedly more important than its Political Wing, the contribution of the latter cannot be underestimated. By providing an efficient administration and setting up parallel government structures, the Political Wing is preparing for the complete takeover if and when *Tamil Īlam* is achieved. Its extensive propaganda work has been crucial in winning support.

The Intelligence Unit

Unlike the Political and Military Wings, the Intelligence Unit has a distinct identity and is directly accountable to Prabakaran. Pottu Amman is incharge of this Unit and is believed to enjoy considerable freedom of action.

In every zone there is an Intelligence Unit. There is no interaction between zonal units. Each zonal unit has its military and civil intelligence units, between which again, there is no interaction. Moreover, it is believed

⁴⁴ 'Dinesh' (Journalist from Jaffna), interviewed in Madras in September 1992.

that Prabakaran has his own men interspersed among the regular intelligence gatherers. This enables him to have direct access to information and to keep an eye on the intelligence gatherers as well.⁴⁵ Further, every Tiger not only keeps an eye on the enemy but also on his comrades. In fact, more important than its vigilance on the enemy is the LTTE's watch on its own members.

Tiger moles in rival militant groups have not only provided useful information about these groups but have also worked to weaken them. Illustrative of this point is the role played by Varathan, Siththa and Thambiraja who were Tiger moles in the Tamil Eelam Army (TEA). Varathan (who was responsible for the explosion in the building of the Joint Operations Command [JOC] in Colombo in 1991) was a trusted lieutenant of the TEA leader, 'Pannagoda' Maheswaran. He recruited Siththa and Thambiraja into TEA. When TEA had amassed a large amount of arms, Siththa and Thambiraja defected to the LTTE taking the TEA's weapons with them. Varathan's role as a mole was never discovered and he remained in TEA till 'Pannagoda' disbanded it in 1987. Commenting on the role played by the Tiger moles in TEA, Taraki observes that but for them, " 'Pannagoda' would have emerged as a powerful military competitor to Prabakaran."⁴⁶ While the role that dormant moles may have played in exacerbating tensions in rival Tamil groups is yet to be explored, that they undermined these organisations as effectively as, and more clandestinely than did the Military Wing, is clearly evident.

The Intelligence Unit's operations in Colombo are well implemented. The

⁴⁵ Sivaram, n.19.

⁴⁶ Taraki, "Varathan: A Profile", Island International (Colombo), 10 July 1991.

Tigers allegedly get into some business in Tamil dominated areas like Kotahena or Wellawatte. Over time, contacts are developed and political and military information is collected.⁴⁷ They are also known to work as domestic help in the homes of prominent persons where they manage to pick up vital information by overhearing conversations.⁴⁸

In its information gathering, the Intelligence Unit is aided by the use of extremely sophisticated gadgetry. Commenting on this, a source in RAW observed that the basic training in information gathering, making and deciphering of codes, and beating interception that was imparted to the LTTE by RAW, was developed extremely well by the Tigers. By the time the IPKF operations began, the LTTE was well into using computers to make, break, and change codes.⁴⁹

For the LTTE leadership, it is the information gatherers who are most important. In a speech to members of the intelligence and finance units, Prabhakaran reportedly said:

You are the most important section of this movement. Those who are fighting will die some time. We need not be too concerned about them. You are the ones that will be left to run Tamil Eelam. Therefore it is among you that we want greater discipline and loyalty... Eventually, the whole movement must become an intelligence unit. Indeed the whole nation will become an intelligence unit. (Emphasis in the original)⁵⁰

⁴⁷ V.Jayant (Correspondent of The Hindu in Colombo), interviewed in Colombo in June 1993.

⁴⁸ 'Shubha' (Indian citizen in Colombo), interviewed in Colombo in June 1993.

⁴⁹ RAW Official, n.17.

⁵⁰ University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), Rays of Hope amidst Deepening Gloom, Report No.10 (Jaffna, 1993), p.17.

Notwithstanding all the praise showered on the sacrifices of its fighters at public platforms and in its publications, for the LTTE they count for little more than cannon fodder. Untrammelled by the media and public eye, it is the Intelligence Unit that really matters to Prabakaran.⁵¹ This is because of the significant role it plays in averting any challenge from emerging against its leader and in keeping the organisation intact.

The Intelligence Unit is undoubtedly extremely powerful, having the capacity to destroy any individual, whether outside the LTTE or even in Prabakaran's inner circle. Thus, it is not the Mahthaiyas or the Kittus who wield real power within the LTTE. They, no doubt have power over ordinary civilians, but within the organisation it is the Intelligence Unit that determines every one's fate.⁵²

As in all dictatorships, it is the Intelligence Unit that ensures the leader's survival. Only with its dismantling, can any effective challenge to the leadership be engineered successfully.

The Suicide Squad

The Suicide Squad of the LTTE, is often called *Karum Pulikal* (Black Tigers) or Miller's Squad. Unlike the ordinary Tiger who consumes cyanide to escape arrest by the enemy, the Black Tigers sacrifice their lives, in the course of an operation against the enemy. A mission means certain death for a Black Tiger.

51 ibid.

52 ibid.

According to the LTTE, there are over a thousand Black Tigers. The first Black Tiger mission was on 5 June 1987, when 'Captain' Miller drove an explosive-filled truck into the Army camp at Nelliady killing 112 soldiers.⁵³ According to Balasingham, a Black Tiger's identity is kept secret so that he is not identified if he goes to Colombo.⁵⁴ The Black Tigers are provided with "special" training which "gives them the will power" to carry out suicide attacks.⁵⁵

The Sea Tigers

The Sea Tigers constitute the Tiger Navy. Though it had been functioning even earlier it was established as a separate Unit in 1990. It is responsible for military operations on the seas and for protecting the arms and ammunition supply line. It also runs a passenger service for the common people.⁵⁶ It has a political unit which works among fishermen.⁵⁷

The Women's Unit

Cutantirap Paravaikal (Birds of Freedom) is the Women's Unit of the LTTE. It was established as an independent structure with its own administrative and decision making apparatus in 1989. The Women's Military

⁵³ D.B.S.Jeyaraj, "The Suicide Killers: The Cyanide-Capsule Guerillas", *Frontline*, vol.8, no.13, 22 June-5 July 1991, pp. 30-31 and Manimaran, "Karum Pulikal" (Black Tigers), *Erimalai* (Paris), August 1991, p.3.

⁵⁴ Balasingham in the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) film Suicide Killers, telecast in November 1992.

⁵⁵ Prabakaran in *ibid*.

⁵⁶ P.Nedumaran (Leader, Tamil Nationalist Party [TNP]), interviewed in Madras in November 1993.

⁵⁷ Sivaram, n.19.

Unit was also inaugurated in September that year.⁵⁸

Initially, women were involved only as helpers and intelligence gatherers. Not given arms or cyanide, they were more vulnerable than their male counterparts.⁵⁹ Today, however, the women cadres wear two capsules signifying their commitment to national liberation and women's emancipation.⁶⁰ Military training for women began in August 1985, in India. Since 1986, women cadres organised into guerrilla units have operated alongside men. They have participated in rural and urban guerrilla warfare, face-to-face battles and commando raids.⁶¹

How does the status of female cadres compare with that of the male cadres? "No different from that in other armies", says a woman of a rival group. In battle, the women are the first to be deployed as they count for little.⁶² However, Adele Ann Balasingham who is a prominent figure in the Women's Unit observes in the BBC film Suicide Killers, that "women are involved in all aspects of the movement."⁶³ Commenting on the film, Ismail points out that both men and women cadres are seen listening to Balasingham's lecture on the history of the armed struggle. However, only male cadres are seen getting a lesson on military operations. Further, while

⁵⁸ Adele Ann, Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers (Jaffna, 1993), pp.42-44.

⁵⁹ Sithralega Maunaguru (Former Faculty Member, Jaffna University), interviewed in Colombo in June 1993.

⁶⁰ Sumantra Bose, States, Nations, Sovereignty: Sri Lanka, India and the Tamil Eelam Movement (New Delhi, 1994), p.108.

⁶¹ For a detailed description, see Ann, n.58, pp. 7-111.

⁶² 'Nirmala' (Member, EPRLF), interviewed in Colombo in June 1993.

⁶³ Adele Balasingham in Suicide Killers, n.54.

men are seen active militarily, women are seen carrying sacks of provisions. Ismail observes that this is illustrative of the women's role in the LTTE - "as adjuncts to the actual fighters".⁶⁴

In the pre-1987 period the only well known women members were Nirmala Nithyanandan and Adele Balasingham and even they had limited influence. However, the role of women is changing. In 1989, Jeya (currently incharge of the Unit) was part of the LTTE's negotiating team. With their growing numerical strength, the woman cadres may come to play a more decisive role in the future.

LEADERSHIP

A significant feature of the LTTE which sets it apart from the other groups, is its leadership. Its leadership has not only displayed considerable organisational capacity, but has also succeeded in keeping this complex structure together.

The Personality of Prabakaran

- Velupillai Prabakaran is the LTTE's political and military commander. He is uneducated and inarticulate. For a guerrilla he is also short-statured, and overweight. Yet, despite these drawbacks Prabakaran has earned the reputation of being one of the finest guerrilla leaders in the world.

Few have seen Prabakaran. In the past two decades he has very rarely appeared in public. Less than 10 per cent of the Tigers have met him.⁶⁵ Yet,

⁶⁴ Qadri Ismail "Boys Will Be Boys: Gender and National Agency in Fanon and the LTTE", Pravada (Colombo), vol.1, no. 7, July 1992, p.8.

⁶⁵ Anandan, n.14.

thousands are willing to die for him. What is it about him that has made him such a legend? Critics have argued that it is his inaccessibility that has made him an enigma and which has led to the building of myths about his abilities and powers.⁶⁶

According to Hellmann-Rajanayagam, Prabakaran's appeal lies in his similarity to the warrior-heroes of the *Puranānūru* period. In her words:

It seems beyond doubt that he arouses fierce allegiance among his followers because he is more than anything else, a traditional Tamil hero-ascetic: fiercely faithful, practicing and exacting strict discipline by shunning alcohol, tobacco, stimulants and forbidding his men to have extra-or pre-marital affairs, norms of conduct which are based on and justified with traditional Tamil and Hindu classics.⁶⁷

Though there may be some truth in this, there are other, more substantial reasons for his charisma.

His reputation, built assiduously by Tiger propaganda, is that of an invincible and uncompromising champion of the Tamil cause. This has won him much support among the people. For them Prabakaran personifies *Tamil Īlam*.⁶⁸

Moreover, Prabakaran has given Tamils a new sense of pride in themselves, for which they are grateful. A Jaffna Tamil observes:

Prabakaran has changed the image of the Tamils in the Sinhalese mind, from that of Palmyra nut to that of *puli* (tiger). Today, the

⁶⁶ Ketheswaran, n.5.

⁶⁷ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, The Tamil Tigers : Armed Struggle for Identity (Stuttgart, 1994), p.37.

⁶⁸ 'Devi' (Resident of Jaffna), interviewed in Madras in November 1993.

Sinhalese would not dare to call us Tamil dogs, as they did earlier. Thanks to Prabakaran, they see a *puli* in every Tamil. He has shown the world that we Tamils will not tolerate oppression anymore.⁶⁹

Prabakaran's military abilities have been widely praised. He has been described as a brilliant guerrilla strategist and even as a rare, military genius.⁷⁰ Prabakaran's first achievement was the assassination of the SLFP Mayor of Jaffna, Alfred Duraiappa. However, there are few spectacular encounters which he has personally led. Rarely has he been in the forefront of the fighting. Instead he prefers to plan strategy.⁷¹

Since March 1990, Prabakaran has assumed phenomenal status within the organisation and among the common people. He has been revered as a demi-god who cannot be vanquished. However, increasingly the peace-hungry civilians of the Tamil areas are beginning to resent the supremo. Many see him as the chief obstacle to peace.⁷²

His reputation of invincibility has been enhanced unwittingly by his greatest enemies - the Governments of Sri Lanka and India, and the EPRLF. The IPKF claimed to have killed him atleast four times. Each time the claim

⁶⁹ 'Sivaganesan' (Resident of Jaffna), interviewed in Colombo in July 1993.

⁷⁰ A Senior General of the Indian Army, quoted in N.Ram, "Understanding Prabakaran's LTTE", in V. Suryanarayan, ed., Sri Lankan Crisis and India's Response (New Delhi, 1991), p.27.

⁷¹ G. Ananthakrishnan, "No Taming the Tiger", Indian Express (New Delhi), 24 March 1991.

⁷² Anita Pratap (Correspondant of Time in New Delhi), interviewed in New Delhi in August 1993.

proved false.⁷³ Sources in the Sri Lankan Military too announced his death⁷⁴ as did the Chief Minister of the North Eastern Provincial Council (NEPC), Perumal.⁷⁵ Prabakaran proved them all wrong when he emerged from his jungle hideout in April 1990, enhancing the legend of his invincibility.

The extermination of Prabakaran is vital to his enemies for his removal would deprive the organisation of its most charismatic leader. Perumal has pointed out that his death would be a severe blow to the morale of his cadres.⁷⁶ But perhaps the greatest damage will be to the monolithic image of the LTTE. It is Prabakaran's personality which has kept its cadres together and prevented the organisation from fragmenting.

A comparison of the leaders of the various Tamil militant groups is revealing. Sabaratnam (TELO) was charismatic and had leadership qualities comparable to that of Prabakaran. His licentious lifestyle however destroyed his image.⁷⁷ Maheswaran (PLOT) began well but lost direction early on in the struggle. Padmanabha (EPRLF) was respected as a well-read and idealistic person. His unassuming and pleasant demeanour attracted many people but according to some of his former associates, "strong, silent Nabha" was

⁷³ James Pringle, "Ruthless Fan of Napoleon Leads Tamil Tigers in Rule of the Gun", Times (London), 21 June 1990. That the IPKF had surrounded him on the first day of fighting in Jaffna was accepted by Prabakaran in an interview. Kendall Hopman, "We Have Not Given-up Our Demand for Independence' - V.Prabhakaran", Sunday Times, 8 April 1990. Reproduced in Tamil Times vol. 9, no.5, 15 April 1990, p.5.

⁷⁴ Times of India (New Delhi), 25 July 1989.

⁷⁵ Patriot (New Delhi), 11 August 1989.

⁷⁶ Sunday Times (Colombo), 30 July 1989.

⁷⁷ Raw Official, n.17.

amenable to Indian pressure and incapable of putting to effective use the opportunities that came to the EPRLF.⁷⁸ Unlike Prabakaran, none of these leaders were able to weld together the various factions in their organisations. The ability to inspire their cadres was nowhere near that of Prabakaran. Their personal lifestyles were criticised by their own cadres. In contrast Prabakaran's highly disciplined and spartan ways has endeared him to the cadres and won him the respect of the people.

As a leader, Prabakaran's drawbacks have been his brutality, undemocratic style, and suspicious nature. He is allegedly "abnormally insecure" and fears that his enemies will kill him. Prabakaran "sees a threat in a shadow that moves, in every step of a person he suspects and is anxious to decimate him as soon as possible."⁷⁹ He is suspicious of other Tigers as well. No personal security guard has remained with him for more than a year. Prabakaran sends them on operations in which their decimation is highly likely.⁸⁰ Similarly, no deputy of the supremo has remained one for long preventing the consolidation of a strong second level leadership in the organisation. This may prove damaging to the LTTE in the long run.

Prabakaran and Other Tigers

Prabakaran's relationship with his immediate subordinates in the LTTE and the role they play in the LTTE clearly reveals that loyalty to the supremo is well rewarded. Any challenge to him is checkmated swiftly.

⁷⁸ 'Malathi' (Former Member, EPRLF), interviewed in Colombo in June 1993.

⁷⁹ Panruti Ramachandran (MGR's Advisor on Sri Lankan Affairs), interviewed in Madras in November 1993.

⁸⁰ S.H. Venkatramani (Journalist, The Pioneer) interviewed in New Delhi in January 1995.

The challenge posed by Uma Maheswaran to Prabakaran's leadership is perhaps one of the most important cases of open defiance in the LTTE.⁸¹ Maheswaran, Chairman of the Central Committee in the late 1970s differed with Prabakaran on his emphasis on hit-and-run attacks rather than mass mobilisation.⁸² That Maheswaran was educated, articulate and trained in Lebanon was resented by Prabakaran. Moreover, Maheswaran enjoyed considerable support within the LTTE. To marginalise him within the movement Prabakaran started a campaign against Maheswaran over his involvement with a woman.⁸³ "Disciplinary action" was subsequently taken and Maheswaran was expelled from the LTTE. Prabakaran maintained that the conflict was not between two individuals but between Maheswaran and the Tiger movement.⁸⁴ However, that the conflict had serious personal underpinnings is evident from the fact that Prabakaran himself attempted to shoot Maheswaran in Madras in 1982.⁸⁵

⁸¹ The LTTE's first important dissident was Sundaram. He quit in 1979 and later formed PLOT with Maheswaran. He was killed by the Tigers in 1982. Dayan Jayatileke, "The National Question and Marxism", Lanka Guardian (Colombo), vol. 12, no.1, 1 May 1989, p.16.

⁸² For Uma Maheswaran's comments, see "Can Sri Lanka Remain United...", Spark (Madras), vol.1. no.3, 1985, p.6 and M.P., "'Give Us Diplomatic Recognition' - Uma Maheswaran", Frontline, vol.2, no.24, 30 November-13 December 1985, pp.42-43.

⁸³ For details see M.R. Narayan Swamy, Tigers of Lanka : From Boys to Guerrillas (Delhi, 1994), p.60, pp.66-67 and pp.69-70. Also Ketheswaran, n.5.

⁸⁴ Anita Pratap, "If Jayewardene Was a True Buddhist, I Would Not Be Carrying a Gun", Sunday (Calcutta), vol.2, no. 32, 11-17 March 1984, p.23.

⁸⁵ See Swamy, n.83, p.76.

When Maheswaran was expelled, the entire Central Committee left the LTTE. The only member who remained with Prabakaran, was Baby Subramaniam, his current deputy. In 1982, when Prabakaran was arrested in Madras it was Subramaniam who helped secure Prabakaran's release on bail.⁸⁶ Throughout the 1980s, Subramaniam was active in Tamil Nadu, building up the LTTE's contacts there.⁸⁷ He has however maintained a low profile and has never been featured in the media.

Another very senior Tiger who has been kept away from media scrutiny and is unknown outside the organisation is Appiah Annan. Believed to be the LTTE's expert on explosives,⁸⁸ Appiah Annan is apparently much respected by Prabakaran and often consulted by the supremo. Why the LTTE has kept his identity such a closely guarded secret is not known. Perhaps it is persons like Appiah Annan and Baby Subramaniam who constitute the standby leadership of the LTTE.⁸⁹

Unlike them, Kittu, the commander of the Jaffna peninsula till early 1987 and the LTTE's most colourful personality was a well known figure. Despite his ruthlessness, Kittu's flamboyance made him a favourite with the media.⁹⁰ In early 1987, Kittu lost a leg in a grenade attack. Some speculated that it was the work of Mahthaiya who was then the LTTE's commander in

⁸⁶ Raw Official, n.17. Also, see *ibid.*, p.77.

⁸⁷ Taraki, n.17.

⁸⁸ Anandan, n.14.

⁸⁹ Sivaram, n.19, and Taraki, n.17.

⁹⁰ Almost all the media persons interviewed described Kittu in very positive terms. All mentioned the ruthless streak in him but seemed overawed by his communication skills and jovial nature.

Vanni. Apparently Maththaiya resented the fact that Kittu, as commander of Jaffna was in the limelight and enjoyed a relatively comfortable life there.⁹¹ While tension did exist between the two, the alleged rift between Prabakaran and Kittu was more important.

It was believed that in negotiating with a Government-sponsored delegation in December 1986, Kittu put forward his own policy.⁹² Kittu's comments to the press about the importance of leaders being active in the field was seen as a slight to Prabakaran who for many years had been in Madras.⁹³ Prabakaran's return to Jaffna in January 1987 was, among other reasons, to consolidate his position on the field.⁹⁴ The grenade attack removed Kittu from the scene and he then became the LTTE's representative in Madras and its spokesman in London, until his death in 1993. He is believed to have been a moderate in the LTTE who was in favour of accommodation and negotiations. He was opposed to the LTTE fighting the IPKF and may have counselled Prabakaran on this. Kittu held views different from that of Prabakaran but was unwilling to oppose the supremo on these

⁹¹ Sources in RAW maintain that while there was a serious rift between Kittu and Mahthaiya, it was the EPRLF which was responsible for the grenade attack on Kittu. RAW Official, n.17.

⁹² The LTTE denied the rift and maintained that Kittu had received instructions from Prabakaran on the position to be adopted in the talks. Subramanian, n.29, pp.19-20.

⁹³ In an interview, Kittu said that he never issued orders from behind the lines but led from the front. D.B.S. Jeyaraj, "We Are Prepared to Die, They Are Not'- Interview with LTTE's Kittu of Jaffna", Frontline, vol.3, no.23, 15-28 November 1986, p.119. Rajan Hoole and others, The Broken Palmyra: The Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka - An Inside Account (Claremont, 1990), p.94.

⁹⁴ See Daily News (Colombo), 14 January 1987 and 15 January 1987.

issues.⁹⁵

Unlike Kittu, Mahthaiya has not only differed with Prabakaran but defied him as well. In 1987, when the LTTE had captured some IPKF soldiers Mahthaiya was in favour of holding them to gain leverage against India. Challenging Prabakaran's orders he persisted in holding them.⁹⁶ The soldiers were eventually released but Mahthaiya had made his point.

In 1989, the LTTE denied any links with the assassins of Amirthalingam.⁹⁷ Mahthaiya believed that since the assassins (who were his men) had laid down their lives carrying out the LTTE's orders, their sacrifice should be recognised.⁹⁸ He went ahead and accepted the LTTE's responsibility for the assassination.⁹⁹ Again, Mahthaiya was strongly opposed to the resumption of hostilities against Colombo in 1990. Unlike the others who came around to accepting Prabakaran's stand, Mahthaiya stuck to his viewpoint.¹⁰⁰

Mahthaiya's influence in the LTTE rose spectacularly from mid-1987 when he became its deputy leader. It is believed that prior to leaving for New

⁹⁵ RAW Official n.17.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ See LTTE Statement in Times of India, 15 July 1989.

⁹⁸ "Tiger Deputy Leader Mahathaya Charged with 'Treason'", Tamil Times, vol.13, no.1, 15 January 1994, p.7.

⁹⁹ See Mahthaiya's Statement in Mervyn de Silva, "Tigers - Waiting for Peace after Their Bitter 'Indian War'", Lanka Guardian, vol.12, no.22, 15 March 1990, p.5.

¹⁰⁰ Pratap, n.72.

Delhi in July 1987, Prabhakaran authorised Mahthaiya to countermand, if necessary, any order he issued from India.¹⁰¹ Moreover it is alleged that the LTTE's decision to fight the IPKF was to some extent due to Mahthaiya's increasing hold over the LTTE. In fact, it has also been alleged that Mahthaiya's stand *vis-a-vis* India in 1987-88 was more hawkish than that of Prabhakaran.¹⁰²

Over the years, Mahthaiya built up his own support base within the organisation. When Prabhakaran was in India, it was Mahthaiya who recruited the cadres. Many boys therefore, though in awe of Prabhakaran, had strong loyalties to Mahthaiya as well.¹⁰³ As President of the PFLT, Mahthaiya's participation in negotiations and interaction with the people made him popular among the masses.¹⁰⁴

Marginalising Mahthaiya within the movement therefore, could not be achieved easily. He had to be discredited first. In the East, the Prabhakaran faction allegedly spread rumours blaming Mahthaiya for the LTTE's anti-Muslim stand.¹⁰⁵ The disbanding of the PFLT in 1992 was another

¹⁰¹ D.B.S.Jeyaraj, "Tiger Deputy Leader Mahathaya's Fall from Grace", Tamil Times, vol.13, no.2, 15 February 1994, p.15.

¹⁰² Senior Officer in Military Intelligence (MI), India, interviewed in New Delhi in March 1994. Also, see Dilip Bobb, "High Stakes Gamble", India Today, vol. 12, no. 23, 1-15 December 1987, p.83.

¹⁰³ 'Mahadeva' (Journalist, Formerly with Saturday Review, Jaffna), interviewed in Madras in November 1993.

¹⁰⁴ 'Rajah' (Student, Jaffna University), interviewed in Madras in November 1993.

¹⁰⁵ Jayant, n.47.

way of breaking his base.¹⁰⁶

The LTTE's debacle at Elephant Pass in 1991 was blamed on Mahthaiya's poor strategy. More recently, he was accused of having links with Indian intelligence agencies and was held responsible for Kittu's death. It is alleged that he has been kept under house arrest by the LTTE and may have even been liquidated.¹⁰⁷

To attribute Mahthaiya's fall only to the challenge he posed to Prabakaran would be simplifying the issue. It is believed that Pottu Amman resented Mahthaiya's rise. Playing on Prabakaran's fear of any challenge he built up evidence against Mahthaiya and marginalised him.¹⁰⁸

Another example of internal power struggles in the LTTE is Balasingham's role in deepening the rift between Maheswaran and Prabakaran¹⁰⁹ and later in marginalising Father Singarayar who had moved close to Prabakaran.¹¹⁰

Balasingham's status in the LTTE is ambiguous. The LTTE concedes that he is not a member but functions as an advisor.¹¹¹ However, it would

¹⁰⁶ Jeyaraj, n.101, p.17.

¹⁰⁷ Rahul Pathak and P.Jayaram, "No Longer Supreme", India Today, vol.19, no.5, 1-15 March 1994, p.94 and *ibid.*, pp.16-17.

¹⁰⁸ Raw Official, n.17.

¹⁰⁹ Rohan Gunaratna (Political Analyst), interviewed in Colombo in June 1993. Also, see Swamy, n.83, p.68.

¹¹⁰ Raw Official, n.17.

¹¹¹ Anandan, n.14.

be more apt to describe him only as a spokesman, as he does not play an influential role in the LTTE. His role, as Prabakaran once observed, was to "explain rather than to direct the course of armed struggle."¹¹² Though neither a Tiger nor a Sri Lankan citizen, Balasingham has represented the LTTE in negotiations with Colombo and India. His international contacts have also been useful for the LTTE. Further, frequently acting as Prabakaran's interpreter, he is required for the building up of the supremo's image. To Prabakaran he is useful but dispensable and the two have had their differences. Balasingham had reservations about the resumption of hostilities in June 1990 but did not openly oppose Prabakaran and soon came around to accepting his view.¹¹³

These differences, however, are not known outside the organisation and the Tigers regard Prabakaran with reverence and as some kind of an omniscient being. His decisions are accepted as final because the Tigers believe that "he knows and is always right."¹¹⁴ In contrast to the LTTE where the supremo is accountable to no one, the leadership in the EPRLF is accountable to the Politbureau. Generally, it is the Politbureau which takes decisions. In emergencies, the General Secretary can take decisions on his own but is required to explain it to the Politbureau within a few months.¹¹⁵

In the LTTE, few openly express their dissent or dare to challenge the leadership for "Prabhakaran has a perfect spy network and anyone speaking

¹¹² Hoole and others, n.93, p.183.

¹¹³ Pratap, n.72.

¹¹⁴ This was a remark made by all Tigers who were interviewed.

¹¹⁵ 'Kanapathy', n.20.

against the leader is immediately removed."¹¹⁶ In the words of Yogi, Prabakaran is "our supreme leader and he makes the decision[s]. Even when I don't agree with him, I agree with him."¹¹⁷ Conformity is convenient and silence is the only option for those who wish to remain in the organisation.¹¹⁸

Dissent in the LTTE

The LTTE claims that a Tiger who has been with the organisation for at least a year can leave it whenever he wants after that. But under no circumstances can he join another group or start a new one.¹¹⁹ However, a little known fact is that Prabakaran himself violated this rule. In 1979, when the LTTE split, a demoralised Prabakaran left the LTTE and joined TELO.¹²⁰ The only other defaulter has been Maheswaran, who founded PLOT after quitting the LTTE.

¹¹⁶ Balasingham quoted in Daily News, 2 February 1987. For an account of the fate of dissenters in the LTTE, see University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), The Politics of Destruction and the Human Tragedy, Report No.6 (Jaffna, 1991), pp.78-80.

¹¹⁷ "Yogi and the President...and the People", Economic Review (Colombo), vol.15, no.12, March 1990, p.29.

¹¹⁸ Torture of members who did not conform was known to occur in all groups. PLOT was particularly notorious for this. Members were even fried in boiling oil. S.A.David (Former Member, PLOT) interviewed in Madras in May 1993. Torture occurred in the LTTE too but news of it rarely filtered out.

¹¹⁹ Anandan, n.14.

¹²⁰ Taraki, "The Exclusive Right to Write Eelam History", Tamil Times, vol.13, no.7, 15 July 1994, p.20.

Generally, the Tiger who quits the organisation rarely speaks against it. Most of them prefer to lead a low profile life for fear of being silenced by LTTE reprisals. Another reason for their silence is that sometimes a Tiger who has ostensibly left the organisation still serves it in a different role. Raghu, a close associate of Prabakaran who 'left' the LTTE, still operates as an intelligence functionary in Madras.¹²¹

Divisions in the LTTE

Despite the pressures to conform, individual Tigers like Maheswaran, Nirmala Nithyanandan and Raghavan are known to have left the LTTE. However, cases of a dissenters leaving *en masse* or a faction breaking away have not come to light. The only exception was when Maheswaran and his supporters left the LTTE in 1979.

As of now, there are a few issues on which the LTTE could get divided. The first is the Mahthaiya-Prabakaran rivalry. Although this rivalry is a personal power struggle, both of them have their own supporters and this rivalry could lead to a break-up of the organisation. A strengthening of the Mahthaiya faction could also lead to a split and the liquidation of one by the other will lead to some instability. For now, with Prabakaran in firm control and his Intelligence Unit intact, the possibility of a revolt engineered by Mahthaiya is however low.

The second issue on which there are differences in the LTTE is tactical i.e., whether the LTTE should accept an interim solution and work towards a

¹²¹ RAW Official, n.17.

Tamil Ilam in stages or whether it should keep fighting till *Ilam* is achieved.¹²² Differences on this issue are limited to its leaders. Prabakaran is committed to *Ilam* only as are his cadres. Also he is in firm control of the organisation so it is unlikely that moderates among the leaders would succeed in engineering a coup or even an exodus from the LTTE.

The third divisive issue is based on regional differences. Tigers from the East feel that the decisions are made in the North and orders issued from there. But it is the Eastern Tigers who have to bear the brunt of the fighting. The Eastern Tigers have also been more amenable to a negotiated settlement.¹²³ That the LTTE leadership is worried about the feeling of alienation in its Eastern cadres is evident from the fact that the LTTE's strategy of massacring Muslims was allegedly a response to the demand of its Eastern cadres.¹²⁴ Despite these efforts by the organisation, dissatisfaction among the Eastern Tigers has however persisted. Whether it will lead to a schism is an open question because the Eastern Tigers lack a strong leader who can challenge Prabakaran.

Caste as a divisive factor appears to have been more potent in the early years. In fact, one analyst attributes the Prabakaran-Maheswaran rift to Maheswaran's (a *Vellālar*) refusal to accept Prabakaran (a *Karaiyār*) as his

¹²² A Senior Officer in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), India, interviewed in August 1993.

¹²³ Hoole and others, n.93, pp.96-98 and Pringle, n.73.

¹²⁴ See, Taraki, "LTTE's Eelam Project and the Muslim People", Tamil Times, vol.11, no.11, 15 November 1992, p.20 and Taraki, "Why the LTTE is Gunning for the Muslims", The Island, 19 August 1990. Reproduced in Taraki, n.17, pp.61-62.

leader.¹²⁵ While the Prabakaran-Maheswaran conflict was basically a power struggle, it is significant that when Maheswaran left, a number of *Vellāḷars* like Senthathiar quit with him. However, over the years caste appears to have weakened as a rallying point. The caste consciousness of the cadres has reduced following the broadening of the LTTE's composition and intermixing of the cadres. Moreover, caste discrimination is severely dealt with in the group.¹²⁶ It is for these reasons that the LTTE is unlikely to split along caste lines.

Unlike the LTTE, the other groups have undergone much splintering. The LTTE has not fallen apart because Prabakaran has been in firm control of the organisation. No other leader has been able to match his personality or evoke the kind of support he has in the organisation. It is his personality which has kept rivalries and discontentment in check. It is the emotional appeal of Prabakaran's name which has bound its cadres into a fiercely loyal band of committed fighters. None of the other groups have had a leader of Prabakaran's calibre.

Secondly, Prabakaran has ensured that no other leader is in a position to build an independent power base. In the case of the other militant groups, the military commanders who were active in the Tamil areas had direct access to arms. Thus, during the pre-1987 period the military commanders became powerful enough to breakaway from the organisation. Rifts in these groups

¹²⁵ C.H.S.Jayewardene and H.Jayewardene, Terror in Paradise: The Battle for Eelam (Ottawa, 1987), p.5.

¹²⁶ See D.B.S.Jeyaraj, "The Composition, Ideology and International Dimension of the Tamil Secessionist Movement of Sri Lanka: An Overview" Paper Presented at International Workshop on Comparative Secessionist Movements, 1-3 July 1987 at International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Kandy, p.24.

were usually between the military and political wings as was the case with the EPRLF and TELO.

Finally, the structure of the LTTE has reduced the likelihood of any coup. With an Intelligence Unit directly reporting to him, Prabhakaran has ensured that he will be well informed of any rebellious moves by his subordinates.

Whether the LTTE will remain as monolithic after Prabhakaran is doubtful, for there are fissures in the organisation but these have not turned divisive only because of the supremo's personality and firm hold over the organisation.

SOCIAL COMPOSITION

The social composition of the LTTE has not so far been systematically studied because of paucity of data as access to a sufficient number of militants is extremely difficult.

Age

In terms of age, the Tamil militants are very young. At the senior level, the Tigers are in their late twenties or early thirties, but the cadres are even as young as 14 years. The average age of the Tiger rank and file has been falling steadily due to nonavailability of adult males, following large scale emigration to foreign countries and loss of lives in the war. Consequently, 'veteran fighters' are now in their late teens.¹²⁷ The younger cadres who have only known war and have not interacted with the Sinhalese are therefore

¹²⁷ Lal, n.38.

more aggressive in their approach.¹²⁸

Language and Religion

The LTTE is entirely Tamil. No Sinhalese is known to belong to the organisation. Its members are predominantly Hindu. The Christian component is also quite large probably because of the large number of *Karaiyārs*, who are mainly Catholic.¹²⁹ There are some Muslims in the organisation but their numbers in the LTTE has fallen over the years for a number of reasons. For one, certain sections in the LTTE had advocated limited recruitment of Muslims because they were "unreliable".¹³⁰ Moreover, as relations between the LTTE and the Muslims worsened steadily, Muslims gravitated to Muslim militant groups.

Caste

While the LTTE's caste composition has become more mixed over the years, it is the *Karaiyār* caste which is the most widely represented in the organisation. Most of the prominent Tigers like Prabakaran, Mahthaiya and Kittu are *Karaiyārs*.¹³¹ Like the LTTE, the TELO was also a *Karaiyār*

¹²⁸ Anandan, n.14.

¹²⁹ Jayant, n.47.

¹³⁰ An Eastern Tiger who had advocated this policy argued that if a trained Muslim Tiger left the LTTE with some cadres, he would start a Muslim militant organisation which would get assistance from the Muslim countries. This was likely to damage the Tiger movement far more than when a non-Muslim Tiger like Uma Maheswaran left the LTTE. To avoid such damage, the LTTE limited recruitment of Muslims. 'Karthigesu' (Senior Tiger from the East), interviewed in Madras in November 1993.

¹³¹ Some writers argue that the Tamil militant struggle is not only for "national independence" but also against *Vellālar* domination. They point out that though the groups have several castes represented in

dominated group.¹³²

The *Karaiyārs* are known for their seafaring and fighting prowess¹³³ and the LTTE has benefitted from this strong *Karaiyār* component. In contrast, groups like PLOT and EPRLF suffered because of the lack of a *Karaiyār* base. PLOT was predominately *Vellālar* - an agricultural and education-oriented caste. The EPRLF leadership was *Vellālar* but its cadres were mainly *Pallar-Paraiyar* - castes involved in toddy tapping. Neither of these groups had cadres oriented towards or emotionally equipped for fighting.¹³⁴

According to Hellmann-Rajanayagam, caste composition of the groups did influence their interaction with each other. The aligning of PLOT and TULF at the Thimpu Talks has been attributed mainly to their *Vellālar* composition. It is likely that the LTTE, as "a forum" for castes below the *Vellālar*s,¹³⁵ saw TELO and EPRLF as rivals to the support from the *Karaiyārs* and the lower castes respectively. While it was hegemonistic ambitions that motivated the LTTE to liquidate TELO and EPRLF, the caste

them, it is the "various oppressed caste groups who have become its motive force." Victor Ivan, "Caste Oppression and Youth Unrest", Counterpoint (Colombo), April 1993, p.27. However, it must be noted that the *Karaiyārs* who are the motive force in the LTTE are definitely not an oppressed group.

¹³² Hellmann-Rajanayagam, n.67, p.36.

¹³³ D.P.Sivaram, "Militarism and Caste in Jaffna", Lanka Guardian, vol.15, no.5, 1 July 1992, pp.9-10.

¹³⁴ Sivaram, n.19.

¹³⁵ Dagmar Hellman-Rajanayagam, "The Tamil 'Tigers' in Northern Sri Lanka: Origins, Factions, Programmes", Internationales Asienforum (Cologne), vol.17, nos.1-2, 1986, p.72.

factor cannot be ignored.

Region

The fishing village of Valvettiturai and the surrounding Vadamarachchi region is often described as the cradle of Tigerhood. It is the area of origin of many Tigers especially its leaders. Prabakaran, Mahthaiya, Kittu, and Baby Subramaniam belong to this area. Explaining the LTTE's Valvettiturai image, Kittu argued that when Prabakaran started the LTTE it was natural that his close associates would be the early recruits. Valvettiturai therefore predominated.¹³⁶

Taraki observes that prior to the split in the LTTE, its composition was geographically spread out from Point Pedro to Pottuvil.¹³⁷ Yet even within this broad composition, it was the Valvettiturai faction which dominated. With Sundaram, Maheswaran, Senthathiyar and others leaving the LTTE, the Valvettiturai clique emerged stronger.¹³⁸ Subsequently organisation, recruitment, and military action became "localised" and was undertaken in areas from where its leaders hailed. Gradually the LTTE came to be identified with the Jaffna peninsula.¹³⁹

TELO was another group which originally had a significant Valvettiturai component. Its leaders Kuttimani, Thangathurai and Jegan hailed from here. But after their deaths, the new leader Sabaratnam came from Kalviyankadu.

¹³⁶ Jeyaraj, n.93.

¹³⁷ Taraki, "Wrong Strategies of TNA and RAW Moves", *The Island*, 17 December 1989. Reproduced in Taraki, n. 17, p.17.

¹³⁸ David, n.118.

¹³⁹ Taraki, n.137, pp.17-18.

Its military leader was from Udupiddy. Consequently, many Udupiddy iads joined TELO and gradually TELO became less Valvettiturai-based. By 1984, Valvettiturai had become the monopoly of the LTTE.¹⁴⁰

Around the same time the LTTE's composition saw a decisive move out of the Vadamarachchi region, when a major influx from the East took place following the operations of the Special Task Force (STF).¹⁴¹ The LTTE's geographic composition broadened further after its rivals like TELO and EPRLF were decimated in 1986.

Despite this geographical widening of its social composition, the locus of decision making continues to be the Jaffna peninsula. In fact, for several years it was the Northern Tigers who were in charge of Eastern operations. Ramu, Basheer Kaka, and Kumarappa were Jaffna Tigers commanding the East. It was only in 1987, that this trend changed with the appointment of Karuna, a leader from the East.¹⁴²

A stronghold in Valvettiturai gave the LTTE a tremendous advantage over its rivals. For one, since time immemorial, Valvettiturai has been notorious for its smuggling/fishing community which not only possesses a high expertise in negotiating the sea but has also developed an efficient and extensive smuggling network. That seafaring expertise and developed infrastructure was now at the command of the Tigers. Further, the coastal stretch from Delfts to Valvettiturai has some of the finest landing sites on the

¹⁴⁰ D.B.S.Jeyaraj, "Who was Sivarajan? An Exclusive Investigation", Frontline, vol.8, no.18, 31 August - 13 September 1991, pp.117-18.

¹⁴¹ Hoole and others, n.93, p.96.

¹⁴² Taraki, "The LTTE's 'Jaffna First' Policy", The Island, 23 December 1990. Reproduced in Taraki, n.17, p.85.

island which enables the Tigers to transfer men and material from the Indian coast to the North easily. While there are some fine landing sites elsewhere too, the infrastructure there is nothing in comparison to that in Valvettiturai.¹⁴³

Educational and Economic Background

The socio-economic background of the Tigers cadres has changed over the years. Upto the mid-1980s, many of the cadres were from middle class and moderately educated backgrounds - the victims of 'Standardisation'.¹⁴⁴

Since 1986-87, there has been a steady emigration of the middle class to the West. A Jaffna University faculty member observed that University students are less willing to join the LTTE and are more anxious to complete their education and go abroad. Consequently the middle class component of the LTTE appears to have fallen. In recent years, the proportion of cadres from the lower class is increasing. It must be noted that this change in the class component of the LTTE is occurring not because of any ideological change in the LTTE but as a fallout of the war.¹⁴⁵

Gender

The LTTE is a male-dominated organisation. It claims that it has 3000

¹⁴³ Taraki, "The TNC Can Woo Colombo", The Island, 28 January 1990. Reproduced in Taraki, n.17, p.26.

¹⁴⁴ Newton Gunasinghe, "Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka : Perceptions and Solutions", in Charles Abeysekera and Newton Gunasinghe, eds., Facets of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka (Colombo, 1987), p.70 and Hellmann-Rajanayagam, n.67, pp.33-37.

¹⁴⁵ K. Sritharan (Faculty Member, Jaffna University), interviewed in Colombo in June 1993.

women cadres.¹⁴⁶ In the early 1980s, the LTTE was reluctant to recruit women as it perceived them as evil and responsible for diluting the determination of men.¹⁴⁷ There was a sharp increase in the number of women recruits from 1987 onwards. This has been attributed by the LTTE to the "barbarous" acts of the Indian soldiers against Tamil women.¹⁴⁸ "Practical necessity" however, seems a more plausible reason. With a sharp decrease in male recruits following emigration or death, the LTTE was left with no choice but to recruit women.¹⁴⁹

APPRAISAL

Unlike the other organisations the LTTE has not been structured (as advocated by Mao) to be a guerrilla organisation with a strong Political Wing which dominates the Military Wing. On the contrary, the LTTE has been a guerrilla army with a Political Wing as an adjunct.

Alongside an increase in the size of its membership, the LTTE has undergone a phenomenal growth in terms of the setting up of specialised units. However, the LTTE has not become an inefficient or unwieldy organisation for a number of reasons - decentralisation of decision making in daily and minor operations, an efficient communication network and Prabhakaran's firm control over the organisation.

¹⁴⁶ Women's Front of Liberation Tigers, Tamil Women in the Struggle for a Free and Independent Tamil Eelam (n.p., n.d.).

¹⁴⁷ Hoole and others, n.93, p.327.

¹⁴⁸ Women's Front of Liberation Tigers, n.146.

¹⁴⁹ Basu, n.60, p.109.

While undoubtedly an efficient and well run organisation, the LTTE has several disturbing features. Structured to function as an army, the LTTE has not shown any signs of internal democracy, decision through debate or organisational elections. Again, rigid discipline and complete control of the leadership over the organisation reveal a distinct authoritarian streak.

The LTTE's social composition has broadened considerably over the years. Its caste and regional composition are important inputs in its seafaring and fighting prowess. Whether its composition has influenced its mass support base is one of the issues to be examined in the following chapter.