

Awakening at Dusk

by Douglas Ayling

Gaya, a young lady from the LTTE Womens' Wing was beautiful, nervous and excited. On Friday at six pm, she approached the microphone stand and addressed the crowds.

"India rained bombs on us and raped our women. They took away our men and made widows of our women," she said, her voice lilting whole octaves in impassioned quavers. Compare Gaya's words with Prabhakaran's of only a fortnight ago: "We love India. We love the people of India". It seems that neither extreme of emotional expression will reverse the Chennai Provincial Government's demand for Prabhakaran's extradition. This was the Annai Bhoopathy in Batticaloa. Gaya, the second in command of the Batticaloa and Ampara District Women's Wing was addressing a crowd of approximately 5,000 - assembled outside the memorial mausoleum of Annai Bhoopathy.

Here beside the beach, and in the light of a sun settling crimson through cumulus clouds, people gathered to commemorate the death by fasting of Annai Bhoopathy 14 years ago on this day. Bhoopathy - an LTTE activist - had died fasting in protest against the IPKF on April 19th 1988.

The site of Bhoopathy's grave has been enclosed by an expansive walled compound. Decorative lights encircle the sweeping walls, and the paths within the garden are lined by a variety of potted plants and flowers. Within seven weeks of being granted planning permission, the grave was carpeted with white tiles and adorned by a pagoda structure. The plot of land for this memorial garden cuts across a Norwegian scheme for planting trees along this exposed coastline.

Where has all the money come from? The giant speakers which send music across the assembled throng, the stage, the lighting and scaffolding, the band which plays to the crowds before and after the speeches and long into the night - this is a grand event for which the word "memorial" seems inappropriate.

As four vehicles in impeccable condition pull up, their Tamil Tiger flags fluttering in unison from the bonnet, we are reminded that this "awakening" is essentially a political rally. Prabhakaran claimed in his press conference that Pongu Tamil is an independent grassroots organisation, which he cannot take responsibility for. And we look around, and we see his face everywhere. From the back of the stage his portrait beams in freedom fighter attire, he smiles down on Annai Bhoopathy's grave from another framed photograph. And from the pole in the centre of the memorial gardens the tiger and crossed rifles flag hangs over us all.

The political rally continues, "Small people can achieve big things, so I ask you to come and help us, to join the Tamil Homeland", Gaya shouts. Banners around Batticaloa proclaim of Bhoopathy that "Even though she was an ordinary Tamil woman, she took on an Empire" and on another, the slogan states simply, "Bhoopathy slapped India".

Meanwhile, five ice-cream vans ply their trade near the outskirts of the crowd, as water tanks are delivered from Unicef, World Vision Lanka and the Swedish Government.

Feelings run high, and a small scuffle breaks out behind the stage, but ultimately this political rally must be a disappointment to the LTTE. The night before, as the finishing touches of grouting were added to the tiled mausoleum, we were told that there would be 50,000 people attending the pongu. There seems today only to be a tenth of that figure.

How strong is support for the LTTE in this area? On the one hand, here is a cause to believe in, an event to attend amid the poverty of Batticaloa. People will undoubtedly gather for an event of this scale - for the spectacle alone - and one wonders what exactly Tamil Eelam means to such people. On the other hand, reports reach us that following heavy recruitment since the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding, the number of Tamil Tiger cadres in the East has doubled from 3,500 to approximately 7,000.

On Thursday night, as preparations were under way for the Pongu, I met Minister Abdul Rauf Hakeem at a mosque in Batticaloa. With 72 mosques in Batticaloa alone, the Muslim community constitutes a densely populated and sizable minority here in the East. Would they line up to become the next under-represented minority in a future Tamil state, I wondered. Following prayers and ritual washing, Mr Hakeem talked to a group of journalists.

The cabinet minister and leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress was asked if his people were not worried by the prospect of the LTTE reverting to military force if the peace talks fail.

Rauf Hakeem replied: "They are worried, but we need to grapple with this issue, we need to take this bull by the horns".

Hakeem has argued for the importance of the SLMC being seen as an independent and neutral "credible third force" in Sri Lankan politics, especially at the present time. In his discussion with Prabhakaran last week, Hakeem stressed that the strength of the SLMC lay in its ability to "market a solution" to its broad membership.

Thus the SLMC has already started negotiating with the LTTE. Already, changes are seen. The Muslim "awakening" which was due to take place on the day after the Pongu Tamil, was cancelled and replaced by a peace talk. Hakeem explained, "There was an increasing feeling among the Muslims that they were going to be sidelined in this whole process; but in this dialogue we achieved much more than what we thought we could achieve by a negotiation of that nature."

"So as things stand we feel that it might send the wrong signals," he concluded of the cancelled plans. Suddenly the claims to independence and "our essential neutrality" seem rather shallow.

The LTTE granted the SLMC a number of concessions in their agreement, of which it seems that the most ideologically gratifying for Mr Hakeem was Prabhakaran's recognition of the Muslims as a distinct and separate culture.

I asked him therefore, of the people whose interests he represents. "Where do these interests actually lie? Would the Muslim community in Sri Lanka support a federal solution, with a separate Tamil state and a separate Sinhalese state?"

He replied, "I think that a federal solution would be a blessing that everyone would accept. People fear that it might even go up to confederation or beyond ... It is also important for the Muslims to know that it should not be the centre alone which should be federal. The regional administration also should have federal characteristics ..." "We are not looking at a south-eastern council in one corner of the country, but rather we are looking at a very dignified power-sharing arrangement through which we can have considerable say politically over non-confrontational politics."

As the Muslim community decides its own agenda for Bangkok, it seems that even before talks have begun, the LTTE has very different ideas about what will be discussed at the peace talks - in comparison to plans envisaged by the government. According to Rauf Hakeem, the LTTE proposes to discuss the interim solution first, and then to have a final solution "discussed later". In contrast, the government sees the interim solution as "a transitional provision of the overall solution" in the words of the cabinet minister. Yet in the context of talks, one question recurs. It hangs over Sri Lanka, urgently demanded by journalists and anxiously murmured in the corridors of power. How do you know you can trust Prabhakaran?

"I do trust that the LTTE certainly knows that they cannot trifle with Muslims - once they have committed to us in this fashion - because their credibility is at stake. And I am sure Prabhakaran values his credibility vis a vis the Muslims. In my discussion I could see it."

It seems that Minister Abdul Rauf Hakeem is putting a brave face on a situation outside his control. It is good to have optimism for the peace process and to engage with it wholeheartedly. And yet to hope against hope that a terrorist leader values his credibility would seem naive were it not for the trenchant faith with which Mr Hakeem battles on.