**Dead men talking | The Indian Express**

This is one box nobody would like to check on his CV. Not even the most battle-hardened hack. But,early in September of 1989,I found myself in the wrongest place at the wrongest time. And witnessed my first,and hopefully only,live (apologies for that horrible malapropism,but we are all brainwashed by news TV now) execution ever. This was in the middle of Galle Road,Colombos shopping and pleasure strip,studded with clubs and malls. For just a moment,it had even seemed that the gunshot roar had come as a relief. There was a mild groan,and silence again. And as I reported then,in what you may call the first draft of this story (Sri Lanka: Falling Apart,India Today,September 30,1989),when a man is shot in the head with an M-16 rifle at 30 metres,he just drops dead. Soldiers jumped past streams of blood and poked the body with gun barrels. Anyone who tries to take a picture will join this body in the ambulance,<U+0094> warned the officer. Since all of us had just seen him carry out the execution,nobody would even think about that. This was the Sri Lanka of 1989. The victim had been clutching a bag. Soldiers suspected it contained a bomb and challenged him. He just sat down in fright as snipers took positions and a crowd of hundreds gathered,as if around a street performer. The man,obviously frozen in terror,just continued sitting quietly. It is a horrible comparison if you saw that film,but years later,as I watched Kevin Spacey,on his knees,his face a portrait of meditative peace,waiting for Brad Pitt to shoot him in David Finchers disturbing dark thriller,Seven,this execution came back to me. Unlike Spaceys evil John Doe,this was a totally innocent man. Its just that you somehow saw calm,not fear,on his face. The set-piece in place,and too scared to close-in,in case he was a suicide bomber,a sniper first shot him in the shoulder. He lay writhing in pain,still quiet. Shoot him,kill him now,<U+0094> shouted the officer. Another sniper shot him in the head. Next to his body,his bag now lay,its contents spilled: fresh vegetables. Five minutes later,the road was open,and life back to normal. For me,it was just an evening walk from crowded Dehiwala to my hotel,Lanka Oberoi (now Cinnamon Grand). No part of the subcontinent is unfamiliar with mass violence. But youve seen nothing like Sri Lanka in those years. Corpses floated down rivers,hung from trees,smouldered by the roadside,smelling of flesh and rubber. The smell told you the favoured method of execution in Sri Lanka then was not a single M-16 bullet,but necklacing<U+0094> tie the arms,put a tyre round the neck,throw a tin of kerosene and a burning cigarette. On the drive from Katunayake airport to Colombo,as you crossed Kelaniya (also called Kelani Ganga river),where,a little upstream,the 1957 World War II classic The Bridge on the River Kwai was shot,you looked down instinctively for floating bodies. You were rarely disappointed<U+0094>. The Colombo commuters and school childrens favourite pastime was hanging around the Kelani bridge looking for bodies. In fact,a day before I witnessed that execution,the state-owned Daily News reported that the price of fish was crashing: who would want to buy fish feeding on human bodies? Mind you,this wasnt the Tamil north and the east. Prabhakaran was not to blame for this,though he was up to his own stuff,on the run from the IPKF,but carrying out the odd deadly ambush and cutting that diabolical deal with Premadasa. This was the turn of the Sinhala mainland to be on fire. The radical left JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) insurgency raged. Sinhala killed Sinhala. Soldiers killed civilians,guerillas killed soldiers and state-sponsored vigilantes Green Tigers,Yellow Scorpions,Blue Cobras and so on killed whoever they wished to. Tens of thousands were killed during those months. Led by Rohana Wijeweera,as charismatic and cruel as Prabhakaran,the JVP paralysed Sri Lankan elites. My old friend and Tamil moderate politician and lawyer,Neelan Tiruchelvam,put it brilliantly,as only he could. Doctors cant treat,teachers cant teach,lawyers cant defend. The very basis of our lives is under threat.<U+0094> In these five weeks,the toll in just Sinhala areas crossed 5,000. And remember,the total Sinhala population then would not have been more than 1.2 crore. This,when there had been no riots. Just targeted killings. The JVP brutalised Sri Lankan society even more than the LTTE,because it wrecked their heartland. And then,all of a sudden,in fact just two months after I witnessed that execution,the JVP story was over. Rohan Gunaratna has written wonderfully detailed accounts of this,but basically,in November 1989,Wijeweera and his deputy were captured and killed. But not before they had revealed,under torture,all that they knew. Then,it was just a matter of the forces and the vigilantes picking out the rest within days. And the brutal 2009 assault that finished the LTTE was a similar success,on an enormously larger scale. On the same tour of duty,the Tamil areas presented a different picture. The IPKF was now quite dominant,and the LTTE in hiding. Between RAW and the Indian army,two anti-LTTE armed groups,EPRLF and ENDLF (Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front and National Democratic Liberation Front) had been set up. Essentially,these were armed mercenaries crueller than the LTTE,but with not a fraction of their discipline. Eventually,the LTTE massacred most of them. I have in my notebook two remarkable lines from these fighters. A namesake,Sekhar,said,Life is like a hand grenade. You wait more than a second after pulling the pin and it is all over.<U+0094> Sure enough,this 18-year-old EPRLF fighter said this clutching a grenade in one hand,an AK-56 in the other. And Mangalaraja,26,of the ENDLF,simply said: First you fight for revenge. Then you cant do anything else.<U+0094> I also remember Jayantan,10,and Paradaman,12,Valvettithurai cousins who expertly dodged IPKF patrols to distribute mostly cyclostyled LTTE leaflets. They happily posed for pictures,bicycle,pamphlets and all,and spoke glowingly of how they waited to turn 15,so we can use guns,not leaflets<U+0094>. From all accounts,subsequently the LTTE dropped that age restriction as well. On the Sinhala side,nobody personified that cycle of killing and revenge more than the DIG of police,Premadasa Udugampola,then 46,and widely hailed as Sri Lankas Dirty Harry. I drove to Kandy,in the mountains,where he was then posted,to see him. His only mission was to finish the JVP. Why such cruelty,<U+0094> I asked him,surveying his office: several makes of grenade,and dum-dum bullets in the half-open drawer in his desk,the ammunition banned by the Geneva Convention and which he preferred in his favourite 38 Browning,and it would shatter a human body at close range. An Uzi submachine gun lay to his right,a light machine gun next to his chair and,not to take any chances,a commando knife under the pile of his files. Why so cruel,you ask me?<U+0094> he said,how can I forget July 28,1988?<U+0094> That is when the JVP ransacked his native home in Galle,slaughtering his 78-year-old mother,brother,sister-in-law and two children. He caught each one of the killers and personally supervised their execution,slowly,patiently<U+0094>. He made no excuses,no evasions. They showed me no mercy. I show them no mercy,<U+0094> he said,pouring a refill in my tea cup. Once finished with the JVP,Udugampola joined politics. But not everybody you came across was a bloodthirsty human bomb of some sort. Sri Lanka had its men of peace. They just lived even less than the mass murderers. One of every visiting journalists favourite was lawyer and TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front) MP Neelan Tiruchelvam. We loved his home for its warmth,food,drink,insight and quotable quotes. I later served for several years on the board of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies,which he and a fellow (Sinhala) intellectual,Kingsley de Silva,ran from Colombo and Kandy. It was on the day of one of those board meetings,on July 29,1999,long after I had ceased to be an active reporter,that we decided to meet for breakfast,at 10,an hour before the board meeting. I waited for him,pacing up and down the lobby of the Intercontinental (now The Kingsbury) and wondered how Neelan,ever so British,could be so late. Until a bell boy told me he had just heard on radio that he had been assassinated on his way to the hotel. An LTTE human bomb threw himself on the bonnet of his car and pulled the trigger. His cremation that afternoon was one of the most devastating hours of my working life,and brought back many old memories. Until one froze. At one of those relaxed,open-house dinners at his home,somebody asked him if it was dangerous to be in public life as a moderate in Sri Lanka,particularly if you hailed from Jaffna. Neelan,for ever a proud Jaffna-ite he would love to take you to a proper Jaffna restaurant at Hotel Renuka said it wasnt such a problem. And some risk was always to be accepted in public life. I said,in Sri Lanka,the risk was a bit more than usual. I mentioned my first Sri Lanka notebook of early 1984. It contained the names of 28 persons interviewed. More than half of these had already been assassinated by June 1991. Keep that notebook,<U+0094> Neelan said,and closely watch the survivors.<U+0094> Then he asked if his name featured there. With that smile that,in the words of his student and now a top scholar,Ruwanthie de Chickera,who spoke at his funeral in July 1999,always suggested he was hiding a secret from you. Actually,it didnt. But as I remembered that conversation,I also figured that the list of survivors was now down to seven anyway. Most of these were decent men of peace. There was a scholarly,depressed exile in Madras called V. Yogeswaran,a TULF MP. I met him in January 1984 with his wife Sarojini. Ceylon,actually,has no future,<U+0094> he said,at best,it will be the Lebanon of South Asia,<U+0094> words made famous later,as the publication I worked for then used these in its advertisement campaign,Read today,quoted tomorrow.<U+0094> Yogeswaran and Sarojini returned to Sri Lanka in 1989 with hope,and joined TULF chief A. Amirthalingam in peacemaking. The LTTE shot them both as they sat sipping tea at home. The third TULF MP,M. Sivasithamparam,survived with a bullet in the chest. Amirthalingam had been killed already. Brave Sarojini persisted,returned to Jaffna,was elected mayor in January 1998,and lived in a house without security. LTTE hitmen walked in one day and shot her. Lakshman Kadirgamar,foreign minister,was killed by an LTTE sniper on August 12,2005. T. Maheshwaran,UNP MP,was killed in Colombo in 2008. Nadarajah Raviraj,former Jaffna mayor,was shot in Colombo in 2006. Other names kept disappearing from that notebook too. Sri Sabaratnam,nicknamed Tall Sri for his slim,lanky frame,who headed the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and who was my nightmare in Madras for ordering endless cups of coffee in my room at the Taj Connemara and finishing my per diem in a couple of hours,was slaughtered along with his 300 supporters by the LTTE. A similar character by the same name appears in Madras Cafe,to meet a similar fate. Uma Maheswaran,who led another LTTE rival,PLOTE (Peoples Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam),was killed too. Some survivors of the PLOTE formed the mercenary band hired to carry out the 1988 coup in the Maldives that was foiled by Indian forces. Kittu,the one-legged propaganda chief of the LTTE,was entombed by Indian intelligence and navy in a gun-running ship in a famous,and frankly,brilliant black operation. K. Padmanabha,G. Yogasangari,EPRLF MPs,were among a dozen massacred by the LTTE in Madras a year before Rajivs assassination. Sam Thambimuthu,the EPRLF MP from Batticaloa,in whose MPs hostel apartment you were always assured a decent cup of tea and great conversation,was shot in 1990. Another Tamil MP,P. Joseph,was shot during Christmas mass in his native Batticaloa,and his wife was critically injured. With Prabhakaran gone,his ideologue Balasingham perishing to cancer in England,only two now remain. One of these is Balasinghams Australian wife,Adele,and the last was a RAW mole in the LTTE,so I still cant name him. There is nobody all terrorists and militants hate more than peacemakers. The Taliban and the Lashkars kill many more innocent Muslims than Christians,Hindus or Jews. The Khalistanis killed more Sikhs than Hindus. The Kashmiri separatists will kill more Kashmiris than mainland Indians. And the Maoists will kill more tribals than non-tribal exploiters<U+0094>. In all cases,most of the victims will be moderate,innocent,unarmed,particularly those seeking peace. In that sense,Sri Lankas story has not been so different from others. It has just been enormously more brutal,in such a uniquely,clinically dramatic way. Postscript: I was touched to see Neelans son Nirgunan,now a banker in Singapore,come for my talk in Colombo last Saturday. I spoke to his mother,Sithie,and on my way back to the airport,stopped to bow my head at the touching memorial President Rajapaksa has built for the IPKF in his new parliament campus,something we havent done for fear of annoying the Dravid parties. Senior Indian ministers avoid visiting it. My version of the IPKF story in the third,and last,in this series tomorrow.