

Rituals of Revolution: Devotional Practice Among The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

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The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the radical, militant, secessionist organisation that has driven the Tamil nationalist movement in Sri Lanka since the mid-1970s, has successfully posited itself as a decidedly secular movement resting on a hybrid platform that incorporates both Marxist ideals and contemporary Western liberalism. Their websites and the pamphlets they disseminate, for example, consistently propound the paramountcy of universal human rights, while at the same time integrating Marxist notions of alienation and proletarianization. This discourse is largely taken at face value by scholarship and media, which routinely describe the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (henceforth LTTE) as a “terrorist organisation” motivated by material, rather than religious, interests. Scholars and journalists alike report the LTTE’s target in straightforward terms. They aim to form a socialist state in the North and East of Sri Lanka in order to escape the protracted socioeconomic disenfranchisement of the Tamil people at the hands of the majority Sinhalese state. While such reports are not inaccurate, they do not, I contend, attend to the complex ideological forces that have energized and reenergized this grossly disadvantaged movement. The LTTE’s official secularism is commensurate with the religious diversity of the Tamil populace, which includes Saivas, Protestants, Catholics, and Vaisnavas. They are not, however, an areligious movement. In fact, strong elements of devotional practice have guaranteed the movement’s longevity. Although, the Sri Lankan state has recently congratulated itself for eradicating the “terrorist” threat, the LTTE is alive and well in the popular imagination and practices of the global Tamil community.

This paper outlines the undercurrents of devotion in the LTTE in order to add depth to its hitherto shallowly understood pool of resources. While I refer at points to textual evidence, I am particularly attuned to the ritual practices of the LTTE, which are at the heart of their ideological program. Rituals, I contend, are the driving force of the movement, and render it a

religious enterprise on par with multitudes of South Asian religious sects that are inaccurately captured by the non-autochthonous term “Hinduism.” Following scholars such as Mauss, Asad, and Tambiah, I approach rituals as techniques of the body that are pedagogical and transformative in their efficacy. This theoretical foundation assists us in repairing the severance of the outward sign from inward meaning, which Asad traces back through the intellectual forays that characterized the genealogy of European Christian thought. According to Asad, the anthropological concept of ritual has been molded according to understandings of subjectivity that increasingly sought to separate the internal from the external, the body from the mind—a process that has resulted in a misguided trivialization of ritual potency! Our contemporary definition of ritual was forged through “changes in institutional structures and organisations of the self,” which began during the European Renaissance. Ritual, once understood as a script for practice enabling the acquisition of embodied abilities, Asad contends, has been transformed to a signifying practice. The implication here is the separation of internal feelings and thoughts called “emotions” from social forms/formulas/formalities. This dichotomy extends to modern anthropology’s tendency to posit a gulf between ritual (sign) and ordinary life (signified), whereby the “meaning” of the latter might be read through a highly condensed performance of the former. This bifurcated orientation of ritual and of social life in general, which has recently faced scholarly interrogation, is duly questioned in this paper.

Through the LTTE’s ritual repertoire, fighters and civilians alike comport their bodies to align with the ideology of militant, secessionist nationalism. They literally incorporate the requisite abilities of undying devotion to the movement, thereby transgressing the boundary between internal feelings and social forms that often characterizes scholarly understandings of ritual performance. This process of actively articulated devotion is not, however, born in LTTE practice. In fact, despite its official policy of abjuring religion, the rich ritual traditions of Sri Lankan Tamil Saivism reverberate strongly in the LTTE. References to the literature of the Cankam period (circa first century BCE–third CE), the supposed golden age of Tamil civilization, in which the archetypal warrior-hero

1. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

sacrifices life and limb for the protection of kingdom and family, also abound, but are bracketed here because they are thoroughly explored by Pfaffenberger, Hellmann-Rajanayagam, and Roberts. In same the vein, I isolate my discussion from the conspicuous influence of Christian concepts of martyrdom on LTTE practice. As Hellmann-Rajanayagam demonstrates, the Christian model of the martyr-warrior, best exemplified by Jeanne de Arc, reverberates in LTTE understandings of righteous death.² While the practices of this self-described secular organisation are syncretic, my focus remains on Saiva elements, which are relatively unexplored, and which have historically had the most profound impact on Tamil communities in general.

The apotheosis of Velupillai Prabhakaran, the movement's late leader, is the foundation for much of LTTE praxis and for its connection to the sacred Saivite past. Born in 1954 and killed by the Sri Lankan Army in May of 2009, Prabhakaran elicits devotion not unlike that which is traditionally offered to Siva. During his long command over the LTTE, he fashioned himself as a disciplined ascetic, emphasizing themes that shade the colorful and oft-cited lore of Siva. Digressing to review some of these narratives elucidates the process by which Prabhakaran is divinized.

Siva is a bifurcated character. On the one hand, he is the loving husband of Parvati and the wise father of Murugan and Pilliar. On the other, more dominant hand, Siva is a somewhat reckless, itinerant mendicant whose ascetic practice harnesses incomparable power, but has the potential to destroy cosmic stability. Popular puranic narratives recounting Siva as Nataraja (literally “king of dancers”) point to his ominous tendencies to disrupt equilibrium. According to one myth, associated with Cidambaram in Tamil Nadu, Siva and Visnu wandered into the forest as a mendicant and a beautiful woman, respectively. They aroused the sages' lusts, and the sages attacked them. After defending himself and Visnu with ease, Siva began dancing his *anandatandava* (literally “dance of bliss”).³ His dance was so powerful that it caused fear in the sages, the other gods, and even in his wife Parvati. In another popular narrative, Siva's dance contest with the fierce goddess Kali, threatens the stability of the universe.

2. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, “And Heroes Die: Poetry of the Tamil Liberation Movement in Northern Sri Lanka.” *Journal of South Asian Studies* 28.1 (2005): 112–153.

3. David Smith, *The Dance of Siva: Religion, Art and Poetry in South India* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

While not known for his dancing, Prabhakaran embodies similarly threatening potency. He is widely believed to have observed the ascetic practices of celibacy, and the avoidance of alcohol and other intoxicants. Like Siva, he renounces household life to advance towards a loftier goal. While for Siva the goal of ascetic practice is spiritual liberation—a departure from the earth, for Prabhakaran, the liberation of the Tamil country from Sinhalese rulership takes on deep-seated spiritual significance. In a compelling twist, the Tamil country is equated with liberation itself. Despite this logical incongruence, the power Prabhakaran accrues through ascetic practice resembles the dangerous potential of Siva. Neither is subject to ordinary ethical boundaries, and both are approached with fear.

Prabhakaran's apotheosis comes to fruition in his acolytes' practices. During *Mavirar Nal*, or Great Heroes Day, which is held annually on November 26th—Prabhakaran's birthday—the LTTE's illustrious leader take his place as a deity. This day of remembrance includes speeches and dances, as well as the propitiation of *natukal*, or hero stones for fallen warriors, with offerings of flower and incense.⁴ These acts of reverence occur in the overarching context of the Prabhakaran cultus. Like Saivites worshipping Murugan in a Siva temple, LTTE devotees who honor fallen warriors do not doubt the supremacy of Prabhakaran. In fact, dirges that are sung communally throughout the day, assert Prabhakaran's divinity.⁵ In these acts of melodic worship, I contend, devotees acquire the corporeal ability to offer themselves to Prabhakaran-as-deity. The assured words of a fighter-cum-poet translated by Hellmann-Rajanayagam point to the way their repetition in a moment of deeply felt *communitas* might facilitate their incorporation into the realities of participants. Cellappa's affirmation of Prabhakaran's ontological supremacy is unambiguous:

Face and address is he only—our
 Face and address is he only—of the
 Whole
 World indeed the essence is
 Prabhakaran
 Keen eyes...

4. The ancient practice of erecting hero stones, or *natukal*, for the fallen warriors, is referred to in the Cankam corpus, and was revitalized by the LTTE.

5. These dirges are written by LTTE poets, warriors, and diasporic affiliates.

Words from his mouth in
Fragrant golden Tamil
In an effort uniting
The soil of Jaffna thrusting (heaving)
Forever the great one
Burning love⁶

The fact that strong public assertions of Prabhakaran's divinity are not mere social formalities, is evidenced by other corporeal acts that transgress the dichotomies between internal feelings and public formulas, and between ritual as sign and ordinary life as signified. For LTTE cadres, everyday acts of ritual iconicity index relations to the movement's central power—Prabhakaran. Organisational apparel in this context garners meanings that exceed the ordinary allegiance to nation and community that is characteristic of military uniforms in general. In addition to the fatigues they are required to wear, LTTE fighters each hang a vial of cyanide around their necks. They are required to drink the cyanide in the event of enemy capture—a practice that began in 1974 when the young Tamil nationalist, Ponnadurai Sivakumaran, was caught by the Sri Lankan Army and drank cyanide to protect the other members of the movement. The practice of cyanide consumption is not, however, ubiquitous. Instead, the act of bearing the cyanide capsule is a perpetual practice of mimicry through which the fighters align themselves with their courageous and determined leader. As Joseph Chandrakanthan, a contemporary Canadian scholar and supporter of the LTTE, explains, Prabhakaran is “audacious, committed, and willing to endure personal deprivation.”⁷ These characteristics are clearly enacted in the bearing of cyanide. Fighters also mirror Prabhakaran's behavior in daily practices of self-denial. LTTE fighters are widely thought to be celibate teetotalers who exact strict discipline in their regular activities.

Within the social milieu of the LTTE, devotion to Prabhakaran transcends discipline and dedication. Members of the Black Tigers, the elite suicide squad of the LTTE, extend their interpretations of devotion beyond

6. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, “And Heroes Die: Poetry of the Tamil Liberation Movement in Northern Sri Lanka,” 114.

7. A. J. V. Chandrakanthan, “Eelam Tamil Nationalism: An Inside View.” in *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism: Its Origins and Development in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* by. Jeyaratnam Wilson (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000), 159.

the ingestion of cyanide in dire circumstances and the obvious risks to life that are inherent to war. They execute planned suicide bombings and are honored as heroes by the LTTE community. Their willingness to embrace death is not, as sociological analyses of suicide bombing often claim, related to their poverty and desperation. In fact, the Black Tiger unit is composed of a handpicked lot of the LTTE's best.⁸ Cadres apply and wait to be accepted for years. Once accepted, they execute strategically planned (and usually successful) suicide attacks.⁹

The activities of the Black Tigers, like those of the LTTE in general, rest on the Saiva devotional foundations that uphold the movement and that are constituted by ritual practice. In tracing the Saivite antecedents for the LTTE's practice of martyrdom, it is necessary to reflect on the ever-resonating messages of Saiva *bhakti*. The *bhakti* movement (the fifteenth century CE) endowed the subcontinent's populace with a new understanding of human relationships with god, which continues to find expression in nearly every element of living Hinduism. A somewhat radical ideology, *bhakti* posited pure emotion as the primary vehicle to approach the divine, and encouraged the abandonment of Brahmanical ritual norms and textual studies in favor of single-minded, ecstatic devotion. This new religious idiom, which established the idea that any individual can achieve

8. The preeminence of the Black Tigers within the movement is attested to by statistics collected by the United Nations. Of the top twelve groups engaged in suicide bombings worldwide between 1983 and 2000, the LTTE was the most prolific (Neil DeVotta, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 167). The LTTE was responsible for one hundred and seventy one attacks, while the other eleven groups combined perpetrated a total of one hundred and fifteen attacks (Ibid.).

9. In fact, without suicide attacks the LTTE would have been hard pressed to sustain itself against the numerically and economically superior Sri Lankan Army for thirty-five years. The importance of suicide attacks... progressively increased in circumstances where the [LTTE] organisation suffered from military inferiority and was in need of military gains in order to renew a balance of deterrence" (Pedahzur, Ami. *Suicide Terrorism*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 79–80). When the LTTE faced extinction at the hands of the Indian Peace Keeping Force, they launched a barrage of suicide attacks (Ibid.). In 1995, the Sri Lankan Army regained control of Jaffna, and the LTTE immediately deployed a number of suicide bombers to force retreat (Ibid., 78). Again in 1996, the LTTE was on the brink of collapse when they deployed "the most severe campaign of suicide attacks since the commencement of operations" (Ibid.).

liberating union with god, regardless of caste or gender,¹⁰ is thought to have been disseminated in the Saiva context by sixty-three prolific itinerant poet-saints, referred to as the Nayanars.¹¹ Today understood as semi-divine beings, and well integrated into ritual culture, their impact on contemporary Tamil Saivism cannot be overstated.

Their hagiographies, often recounted by Tamil communities and recorded in the twelfth-century *Periya Puranam*, emphasize an ideal of fanatical devotion and glorify the sacrifice of human life for Siva. The narratives of Kanappar¹² and Kaliyar¹³ illustrate these extreme lengths of devotion. Kannappar was a barbaric, untouchable hunter who was overcome by his love for Siva.¹⁴ When Siva tested Kannappar's *bhakti* by crying blood, Kannappar began to rip out his own eyes in order to give them to his beloved deity. Siva appeared before Kannappar to stop him from committing the act of self-mortification, and praised him for his pure love and devotion. Kaliyar was not so lucky. He was an oil presser who expressed his devotion to Siva by burning lamps in the temple day and night. Siva decided to test his devotion by eliminating his wealth, forcing Kaliyar to fill the lamps through various degrading means. One day, he ran out of options: "Unable to give up the satisfaction of serving Siva according to his commitment, he chose to kill himself in the act of service. He put wicks in the lamp bowls, arranged them carefully, took a knife, and in order to substitute his

10. Given its approach to caste and gender, it is not surprising that *bhakti* had an extremely wide appeal, and continues to find expression in nearly all dimensions of living Hinduism.

11. Although nearly all of the scholarship on the Nayanars refers to their influence in the Tamil-speaking regions of South India, their presence in Sri Lanka was also significant. They sung at shrines in Jaffna, debated with Buddhist monks, and converted at least one king from Buddhism to Saivism (Peterson 1989, 13; (Alvappillai Veluppillai, "Tiruvacakar and Ilam Buddhism," in *Buddhism Among Tamils in Pre-Colonial Tamilakam and Ilam*, ed. Peter Schalk (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University Press, 2002), 488–9). The influence of the Nayanars in the contemporary Sri Lankan Tamil Saiva milieu is unquestionable.

12. *The Periya Puranam. The History of The Holy Servants of the Lord Siva: A Translation of the Periya Purnam of Cekkilar*, trans. Alastair McGlashan (Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2006), 650–830.

13. *Ibid.*, 4022–4038.

14. Dennis Hudson, "Violent and Fanatical Devotion Among the Nayanars: A Study in the Periya Purnam of Cekkilar," In *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees*. ed. Alf Hiltbeutel (Delhi: Manohar, 1990), 381.

blood for the missing oil, cut his throat.”¹⁵ For both Kannappar and Kaliyar everything must be sacrificed in serving Siva.

The type of devotion that the Nayanars express, which is so intense that it has been called *vannanpu*, or violent love,¹⁶ is an effective means to commune with Siva. According to Vamadeva, the emotional vehemence of the Nayanars' love for Siva drives them “far beyond normal moral boundaries” to an “excess of blood and death,” which pleases Siva because it expresses their total devotion.¹⁷ Like the acts of the LTTE fighter and the Black Tiger, the gratuitous violence of the Nayanar is lauded because of the pure motivations behind it. By virtue of their selfless devotion, the Nayanars are understood to receive Siva's *arul*, or grace, and achieve a type of *moksa*, or liberation, which differs from understandings of *moksa* we find in traditional Brahmanical Hinduism. Here, the goal of Hindu practice itself is recast in terms of reciprocated love. To be a devotee is to commune with Siva through love, and achieve liberation.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, the expression of *vannanpu* towards Prabhakaran and the community he represents by LTTE fighters similarly unleashes access to the preternatural, liberating power of *arul*. In the soteriology of the LTTE, fallen soldiers win Prabhakaran's love through their self-sacrifices, simultaneously transcending worldly existence and achieving liberation.

With a promising soteriology and rich ritual culture, it is evident that the LTTE never rested on secular foundations. Even today, devotional thought and practice continue to drive the movement that has been all but eradicated in the Sri Lankan state. In fact, the 2009 *Mavirar Nal* in Toronto, which attracted several thousands,¹⁹ provided a venue for the outpouring of devotional fervor in the wake of the LTTE's defeat and the assassination of

15. Dennis Hudson, “Violent and Fanatical Devotion Among the Nayanars: A Study in the Periya Puranam of Cekkilar,” 389.

16. Chandraleka Vamadeva, “The Concept of Vannanpu Violent Love in Saivism, with Special Reference to the Periyapurānam,” Unpublished Dissertation (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, 1995), 35.

17. *Ibid.*, 35.

18. Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Poems to Śiva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 48.

19. While the Tamil weekly in Toronto had advertised the annual celebration in several issues, no venues were announced for fear of sabotage at the hands of the Sri Lankan consulate in Toronto.

Prabhakaran. Toronto's *Mavirar Nal* revolved around the repeated offering of *pucal* to a larger than life image of the late leader, which was temporarily erected in the Tamil community center. With the recitation of *mantram*, Prabhakaran was instantiated before devotees who offered flowers, incense, and *bhajan*, or religious songs, and asserted the continued importance of fighting for Eelam.

At *Mavirar Nal*, Tamils in the diaspora incorporate the ideology of LTTE devotionism through ritual practice. The efficacy of their ritual performances is their transformation into self-sacrificing devotees, and the reproduction of Tamil Eelam as a nation, whether real or imagined. Perhaps, as Deleuze and Geertz have argued in other contexts, the spectacles of LTTE devotionism *are* the state of Eelam rather than representatives of it or means of achieving it. The cosmo-political opera of the LTTE's ritual repertoire both presents a symbolic ontology, and by presenting it, makes it happen. Ultimately, the ritual culture of the diasporic LTTE is in need of further examination if we are to understand the continued incorporation of religio-political ideology into the Tamil body politic.